

Supervision Practices of School Principals: Reflection in Action

Yamina Bouchamma
Laval University,
Québec, Canada

Marc Basque
Moncton University,
New Brunswick, Canada

School principals were invited to perform a reflective analysis of their teacher's supervision practices, with the goal of consolidating the knowledge derived from experience, developing appropriate methods, and adapting their interventions. Data were collected from 12 semi-structured interviews. The interview to the double method was used to facilitate the representation and formalization of professional experience to enable these school leaders to articulate their supervisory practices, and adapt and integrate new attitudes or behaviors towards these practices. Interviews were recorded and later analyzed by using mixed coding. The instructions were organized around knowledge, personal skills (climate, work relations, and attitudes), and know-how (prioritization of the supervision, data collection, feedback, and task-sharing). The discussion focuses on leading for teacher's initial and continued training with emphasis on the practitioners' role.

Keywords: supervision; professional development; school principal; teacher evaluation

Introduction

The objective of the methodology associated with reflection in action is to reinforce the learners' ability to read and interpret their environment and act accordingly. Experiential learning associates practice with theory, as well as associates action with thought, as action feeds reflection and reflection guides one's actions (Miron, 1999). In this regard, experiential learning is viewed as the process through which the transformation of experience leads to knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

In this article, the first section presents the research question and goals as well as the theoretical relevance and practical considerations. The following section presents the theoretical framework and concept definitions. The other sections present the methodology, followed by a discussion of the results.

Research Question

In Canada and all around the world, school principals must constantly adapt to the reality of continuous reform within their institution. In the particular francophone context in the province of New Brunswick, many changes have been introduced, such as the extension of mandatory education to the age of 18, the inclusion of special needs students in regular classrooms, the proliferation of multi-program classes, and a new generation of teachers.

Along with these changes, a low level of student achievement was observed in reading, mathematics, and sciences on national assessments (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2000; 2002). In an effort to

Yamina Bouchamma, full professor, Department of Foundations and Practices in Education, Laval University.

Marc Basque, assistant professor, education sector, Department of Kinesiology and Recreation, Moncton University.

improve student achievement, the NBDE (Department of Education of New Brunswick) issued its Quality Learning Agenda (Education and Early Childhood Development Minister, 2002) which was designed as stepping-stones for the province's new economic plan, with the goal of achieving a quality education system by 2012 through an awareness campaign for educators on the importance of excellence in the basic school subjects. In this action plan, the Minister of Education notably recognized the significant contribution of school leaders in their students' achievement (Education and Early Childhood Development Minister, 2002, p. 37). The department emphasized not only the administrative role of principal, but also the role of pedagogical guide for their teachers, particularly in motivating and inspiring them to welcome changes. For this reason, the Quality Learning Agenda focused on training for school leaders, in accordance with the Law on Education (1997, Chap. E-1.12), which evoked the dual role of school leaders.

Research Purpose and Relevance

The Education and Early Childhood Development Minister officially launched its Teacher Evaluation Program-Francophone Sector in 1999. Thus, in their role as teaching supervisors, school principals were responsible for implementing this program. In an approach that fostered continuing development, this program was centered on improving student achievement by improving the quality of teaching and by enabling teachers to evolve and improve their competency as well as their performance under the guidance of their school leaders.

In today's schools, principals are often overwhelmed with daily administrative duties, and often work alone and have very few opportunities for discussion and exchange with their peers, regarding their practices. Therefore, to achieve the quality goals determined in the program, training for principals was also prioritized to ensure more effective teacher supervision methods.

In this context, the methodologies associated with "reflection in action" are designed to help participants consolidate their ability to read their surroundings, to interpret and act accordingly. These methods are based on a capitalization of acquired knowledge and experiences in a reflective analysis of action, in and out of action. This study explored this perspective by enabling school principals to better articulate their teacher supervision practices. The implemented Teacher Evaluation Program (Education and Early Childhood Development Minister, 1999; 2004), thus, provided school leaders with the opportunities to further develop their knowledge, know-how, and actions in this regard.

Theoretical Framework

Since the early 1900s, several studies have examined the construction of knowledge through action (Dewey, 1929; Lewin, 1948; Schön, 1983). According to these authors, action most often precedes the practitioners' knowledge. Despite possessing knowledge in action and practical experience, a vast amount of knowledge remains tacit. In fact, these practitioners are unable to provide a plausible explanation or detailed description of the phenomena that constitute their daily duties. They display abilities but are unable to explain the laws and the procedures. And even while consciously using theories and techniques, they rely on implicit knowledge, judgement, perceptions, and skills.

For example, compared with practice analysis, experiential learning is a recent concept. This American neologism, often associated with the expression "learning by doing", combines practice/theory, action/thought to obtain "two inseparable partners, as the action feeds reflection and the reflection guides action" (Miron, 1999,

p. 21). Among the various theoretical models developed to explain experiential learning, it would appear that the model by Kolb (1984) has exerted the greatest influence on researchers who have studied adult learning processes. This model is characterized by two complementary parts, namely, concrete experience and abstract conceptualization, and consists of four essential phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In this perspective, experiential learning is considered as the process through which the experience is transformed to generate knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

That said, in terms, this experiential learning process helps principals update their supervision practices. It was crucial that these leaders know how to analyze and express their experiences and theories. In a way, this competence is at the heart of their self-development.

Schön (1994; 1996) referred to the basic mechanism of this self-training as “reflective practice”. This practice alone enables the consolidation of the action knowledge and the development of methods to avoid errors. Learning obviously takes place, yet it connects to the person’s own reflection and the regulations it engendered. In this perspective, the authors may state that the connection between theory and practice presents advantages for the practitioner as well as for the researcher. Indeed, this paradigm of the reflective practitioner has the advantage of taking reflection out of the laboratory where theorists worked and also enables him/her to acknowledge that practical problem-solving renders it possible to produce contextualized knowledge. In this sense, a bridge is built between theory and practice (Miron, 1999).

Methodology

Data Collection

Data were collected from 12 semi-structured interviews with principals of francophone schools in the province of New Brunswick, Canada. The interview to the double technique was used during the interviews (Clot, 1995, p. 180). This procedure favored both the elaboration and the formalization of the participants’ work experience (Werthe, 1997). The authors then initiated the explicitation approach (Vermersch, 1994; Vermersch & Maurel, 1997), whereby each principal was invited to openly explore their supervision practices, as well as the adaptation and the appropriation of their school’s Teacher Evaluation Program. Participants were asked to answer the following questions: (1) Suppose that I am your double and that tomorrow, I find myself having to replace you in supervising your teachers; and (2) What instructions would you give to me to ensure that no one notices the substitution?

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio-recorded and analyzed by means of Atlas.ti software by using mixed coding. This coding system began with the categories laid out in its conceptual framework, admitting inherent emergent categories as they went along (Van der Maren, 1995). The coding phases proposed by this author guided his/her content analysis process: using the conceptual framework to construct the themes; performing an initial reading to identify the themes most likely to be retained; developing a draft of the sections; identifying the items in each retained section; establishing representative segments; adding new codes when necessary; using an external coder for the required adjustments to the list; finalizing the coding list; adjusting the initial codes with the last list; and concluding with a final internal verification (Van der Maren, 1995). Based on its theoretical framework, it can be identified and grouped together the elements of the participants’ responses and what Miron (Blanchard-Laville, 1999) referred to as the implicit intention towards action and the practical

knowledge applied.

Inter-coder Reliability

To verify level invariance on the temporal level, the authors coded for a second time and calculated the stability of these results. The authors also tested the reproducibility of the results with other coders. Both times, the results obtained for inter-coder reliability were 70% and 87%, respectively, and were within the norm as proposed by Huberman and Miles (1991).

Results

The participating school principals responded to two questions regarding instructions to be given to a twin or double, namely: (1) instructions if we had to replace him in the supervision of teaching; and (2) advice they would offer to a new principal.

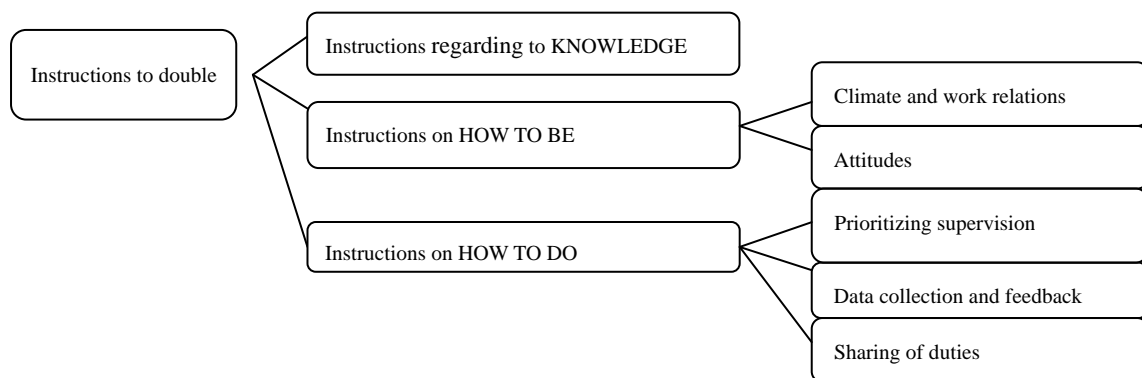


Figure 1. Thematic tree.

The principals' responses were then grouped under three themes (see Figure 1): (1) instructions regarding to knowledge; (2) instructions on how to be; and (3) instructions on how to do.

Instructions Regarding to Knowledge

Under this theme, the principals sought to ensure their teachers' level of knowledge. The participants underlined the importance of explaining the content of the Teacher Evaluation Program to their teachers. "The first thing is probably, for one, 'know your document'. Go and check the interpretation you have of each element" (Subject 3). This process put everyone on the same page:

... but I find that it is important that they understand each domain, they have to understand the difference between domain 1000 and domain 2,000. ... domain 1,000 is when I ask for your plans, I ask you something... that you come and show me something... when I do an in-class observation, I want her to understand that it is often domain 3,000 that I am observing. It is the teaching, per se. That is what I'm looking at, and for domain 2,000, it is the same thing, I am looking at the classroom when I go into your class, I am observing 2,000, 3,000. When it is 4,000, I observe during the entire school year, because it concerns professional responsibilities. (Subject 7)

The participants also stressed the importance of explaining their expectations regarding each domain to the teachers, particularly the new ones:

I tell you, you can keep yourself up to date. I cannot see that in a class observation. Show it to me, I come see you today and I ask "This student, how is he doing? Where is he at? Can you show me something?" I want something concrete. I make that perfectly clear with my teachers. When I mention communication with the parents, do you talk to me about it?

I often tell them “Talk to me. You have to come and talk to me about what you are doing, because I am observing, I take notes all year round. It is you that I am evaluating this year, not just October to December”. (Subject 4)

This type of explanation enabled teachers to understand the program that not only evaluates them in the classroom, but also looks at their commitment within the school. In fact, it is reviewing the Teacher Evaluation Program by highlighting its formative aspects, particularly with new teachers who are in their first year under this supervision process:

Thoroughly explain and then say that it’s good, then go over the advantages, because I think that there are nevertheless many advantages. (Subject 2)

In order to update their own knowledge, the participants mentioned the importance of keeping abreast of what is going on in terms of pedagogy.

Instructions on How to Be

These instructions were divided into two sub-themes: climate and work relations, and attitudes.

Climate and work relations. In these instructions, the principals indicated that the effective supervision could only take place with a relationship of trust and a nurturing work climate in the school. The participants thus felt that it was important to create a climate of respect that favored open collaboration among the teachers. In this context, supervisors acted more as guides than as evaluators for being sensitive to the delicate nature of the supervision, specifically in terms of work relations which were composed of a hierarchical dimension due to the various roles played by each member of the school.

It is accompanying human beings, in all of their sensitivity, in everything they are. And then, you have people in front of you that are highly vulnerable; you can never lose sight of that aspect. (Subject 3)

Attitudes. The participants evoked that their attitudes towards the Teacher Evaluation Program were a determining factor. Regardless of the criticism of this program, if they wanted the teachers to adhere to it, they have a positive attitude.

Instructions on How to Do

The instructions pertaining to “knowing how to do” were centered on the following sub-themes: prioritizing supervision, data collection and feedback, and sharing of duties.

Prioritizing supervision. One of the instructions to the double method was that they evaluate the teachers early in the school year. The schedule had to be established and communicated when the school year began to ensure that part of the time allotted for the supervision was not taken up by administrative duties. The participants stated that it was important to draw up a supervision plan for the year and make this a priority among the duties to be accomplished, unless exceptional situations arose: “Put it into your schedule, and whether you like it or not, be strict with the time you have for that, be self-disciplined in this regard, otherwise it will not work out” (Subject 3).

Data collection and feedback. The principals evoked that it was important to document and justify their reports by using their notes from their in-class and out-of-class observations. These notes had to be fact-based, observable, and measurable on grids shared with the person being supervised. The notes may also become a starting point while establishing the year’s action plan with the supervised teacher. According to the participants, the feedback provided at the end of an in-class observation period should begin with an identification of the teacher’s strengths:

I always meet them by telling them "Look, I'm not perfect, I also have things to improve upon, I want to learn from you. You certainly have things that you could show me that I could show to other teachers". (Subject 6)

The participating principals agreed that the best way to be objective in their evaluation was to multiply their observations and not to limit themselves to only one visit per year. Proceeding in this manner enabled them to really know what went on in the teachers' classroom:

For me, I do not agree that it only takes one visit per year and then we are done... How do you know that that moment is the right one? I would rather have several because then you can see different ways to construct the full picture during the process. (Subject 6)

In this perspective, one must be objective when collecting data to be better able to justify the rating given to the teacher:

... I could tell the person who has come to replace me be sure, each time you rate each domain and each descriptor that you can explain why you rated that way. (Subject 11)

One way of proceeding was to ask the teacher to do a self-evaluation. In this manner, the supervised teacher's rating served as a referent for the rating given by the supervisor. If there is divergence between the two (over- or under- evaluated), a discussion may adjust the rating to its fair value:

... often we rate higher than what the teacher gave themselves. They fill in the document or the domains and the descriptors, and we do the same thing and then we negotiate it together. So far, the experiences I have had in this regard have been more than positive. (Subject 12)

This delicate operation requires that the supervisor should gather data objectively, based on observable and measurable objectives:

However, when we, as evaluators, rate lower than what the person has given themselves, it is very important that we be able to explain why we rated lower. I would say that in 99% of cases, if explained the right way, constructively, it is okay and it is accepted. In my experience, I have already had to place someone under intensive evaluation, and this person asked that I justify each descriptor that I rated. There are a lot of descriptors in this document, so it is crucial to be able to justify them. (Subject 10)

According to the participants, many of the observations performed throughout the year enabled them to multiply their feedback, thus, ensuring the growth of their teachers:

When I have the time, I like to do an in-class observation, give certain comments and then come back a few weeks later and do another observation, and give them the chance to improve too, so not to rate right away, she did not get it. (Subject 4)

Other participating principals believed that this objectivity could not be achieved without considering the informal aspects, namely, what goes on every day in school. It can be stated that it was important not to limit themselves only to the "formal", but also to take into account the "informal", namely, what they referred to as "hallway supervision":

... we walk the hallways, we are here every day, we are able to see things and talk about them, to regularly share with the teachers as often as possible... I think that what is important is being there for the teacher, getting them, without judging them, to go forward in their development. I think it is important to listen to them, to see what I can do to with them to guide them. (Subject 1)

But as I said, sometimes, the time factor does not enable people to do it. But I always try to have more. Not the visits per se. It is like I said, in pedagogical meetings, in hallway encounters, and in informal discussions, they are in any case

where I tell myself, it is part of the process, and I talk with the teacher. Then, I get them to become aware that it is part of the process, their discussions with colleagues... If sometimes I invite them, for example, if a teacher has the objective to improve the learning process in her classroom. (Subject 12)

Some participants stated that it was important to be constantly visible within the school: "Walk around your school, get them to see you". (Subject 9)

Regarding the teacher's development plan, they must target goals that the teacher is capable of achieving. This means to give them the power to do so rather than to focus on their incompetence: "... in that sense, I always try to work with them on their goals so they will not feel demoralized, like 'I am not good enough', things like that" (Subject 6). According to the principals in this study, the teacher's development plan must contain realistic and measurable goals which the teachers must work on throughout the year. Thus, the principals were recommended to seek improvement in practices that were adapted to the abilities of each teacher.

Sharing of duties. The principals participating in the study suggested that under certain circumstances, the teacher supervision duties could be shared with another principal or vice-principal when applicable. This sharing of persons to be supervised may depend on the affinities they may have with each other:

If ever there is a person who does not feel good about, for example, working with you, for certain reasons, or because of past issues, it is perhaps preferable to ask your vice-principal or colleague to supervise them. (Subject 6)

Discussion and Conclusion

The instructions to the double method were divided into three categories, namely, "knowledge", "how to be", and "how to do". In the instructions, pertaining to knowledge, the participants believed in ensuring that the teachers knew each of the domains (1,000, 2,000, 3,000, and 4,000) in the Teacher Evaluation Program. It must point out here that this program, implemented by the Education and Early Childhood Development Minister (1999), was inspired by Danielson (1996) whose model was based on four domains: (1) planning and preparation (planning of learning content); (2) the classroom (classroom management); (3) teaching; and (4) the professional responsibilities (a personal analysis of one's teaching practice or reflective analysis, a sufficient and relevant gathering of information, communication with the parents, participation in school activities, continued professional development, and professional conduct) (see Appendix).

Regarding the instructions on "how to be", the respondents mentioned the importance of a good climate, good work relations, and a positive attitude towards supervision for the latter to be successful. In their instructions, the principals referred to the emotional dimension and the importance of nurturing self-esteem and the feeling of efficacy in the supervised personnel. In this regard, Ribas (2011) was inspired by Maslow's Needs Pyramid in showing that the supervised individuals who feared that they will lose their job will react very emotionally, and in certain cases, out of proportion. In this pyramid, before reaching a certain level, one must first respond to the needs of the preceding level. For example, prior to attaining the security needs level, the physiological needs must first be addressed. Because part of the teacher's self-esteem is defined in their work, it is understandable that evaluating their performance in school is likely to threaten the perception they may have as professionals. In this perspective, a certain level of anxiety is anticipated relative to the supervision process which may manifest as oppositional interactions rather than collaboration, between the supervisor and the supervised.

As for the instructions on "how to do", the instructions to the "twin" show the importance of prioritizing

teachers' supervision over administrative duties (Education and Early Childhood Development Minister, 1997). The government of New Brunswick mentioned the dual roles school principals must play (administrator and pedagogue), when in fact, pedagogy is often relegated to the background. This observation incited the government of New Brunswick to develop its Quality Learning Agenda, in which the goal was to achieve a quality education system in 2012 by focusing on continuing education for various school members.

That said, looking at the situation that prevailed several years later in New Brunswick schools, it can be seen that the Agenda failed to reach the goals laid down by the government. For example, the average outcomes obtained by New Brunswick students in reading were inferior to those obtained by students from other Canadian provinces (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2008). In light of these results, it must acknowledge that continuing education for school leaders must become a priority in New Brunswick's education system.

Therefore, several strategies may be proposed, such as learning by examining one's own practice, to make this training experience more significant for school principals. However, it must be pointed out that this type of reflection is only effective when it takes place in a context of collaboration, such as in professional learning communities where a number of school principals would have the opportunities to discuss their practices respectively. What matters most in this training are activities that directly address the practitioner rather than the technical aspects of their work. It can be conducted that a parallel study with a community of supervisors to enable them to collectively reflect on their practices. The results of this study show that the participants not only learned new knowledge from their pairs and improved their supervisory practices, but also acquired highly useful practical skills and strategies in teacher supervision (Bouchamma & Michaud, 2011).

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Appendix: Components of Professional Practice

Danielson (1996)
Framework Outline

Domain 1: Planning and Preparation

1a: Demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogy

- Knowledge of content
- Knowledge of prerequisite relationships
- Knowledge of content-related pedagogy

1b: Demonstrating knowledge of students

- Knowledge of characteristics of age group
- Knowledge of students' varied approaches to learning
- Knowledge of students' skills and knowledge
- Knowledge of students' interests and cultural heritage

1c: Selecting instructional goals

- Value
- Clarity
- Suitability for diverse students
- Balance

1d: Demonstrating knowledge of resources

- Resources for teaching
- Resources for students

1e: Designing coherent instruction

- Learning activities
- Instructional materials and resources
- Instructional groups
- Lesson and unit structure

1f: Assessing student learning

- Congruence with instructional goals
- Criteria and standards
- Use for planning

Domain 2: The Classroom Environment

2a: Creating an environment of respect and rapport

- Teacher interaction with students
- Student interaction

2b: Establishing a culture for learning

- Importance of content
- Student pride in work
- Expectations for learning and achievement

2c: Managing classroom procedures

- Management of instructional groups
- Management of transitions
- Management of materials and supplies
- Performance of non-instructional duties
- Supervision of volunteers and paraprofessionals

2d: Managing student behavior

- Expectations
- Monitoring student behavior
- Response to student misbehaviour

2e: Organizing physical space

Safety and arrangement of furniture
Accessibility to learning and use of physical resources

Domain 3: Instruction

3a: Communicating clearly and accurately
Directions and procedures
Oral and written language

3b: Using questioning and discussion techniques
Quality of questions
Discussion techniques
Student participation

3c: Engaging students in learning
Representation of content
Activities and assignments
Grouping of students
Instructional materials and resources
Structure and pacing

3d: Providing feedback to students
Quality: accurate, substantive, constructive, and specific
Timeliness

3e: Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness
Lesson adjustment
Response to students
Persistence

Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities

4a: Reflecting on teaching
Accuracy
Use in future teaching

4b: Maintaining accurate records
Student completion of assignments
Student progress in learning
Non-instructional records

4c: Communicating with families
Information about the instructional program
Information about individual students
Engagement of families in the instructional program

4d: Contributing to the school and district
Relationships with colleagues
Service to the school
Participation in school and district projects

4e: Growing and developing professionally
Enhancement of content knowledge and pedagogical skill
Service to the profession

4f: Showing professionalism
Service to students
Advocacy
Decision making