Teacher Conferencing and Feedback: Necessary But Missing!*

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Abstract

According to Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007), the evaluation process plays a powerful role in developing and nurturing a teacher's instructional capacity, which, in turn, contributes to students' academic successes. School districts in South Carolina utilize the Assisting, Developing and Evaluating Professional Teaching (ADEPT) system. A component of ADEPT is the Summative ADEPT Formal Evaluation of Classroom-Based Teachers (SAFE-T). The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of conferencing with feedback. Findings indicate that observations need to occur frequently and for an extended period of time. In addition, systematic feedback is critical for a teacher in improving performance, motivation and personal satisfaction. Lastly, a structure, such as conferencing, should be in place to promote reflective inquiry and conversations for facilitating learning of teachers. It is the desire of the authors that others might use these results as a springboard for discussion as they examine their evaluation process.

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1 Sumario en espanol

Según Sergiovanni y Starratt (2007), el proceso de evaluación juega un papel poderoso a desarrollar y alimentar una capacidad instruccional de maestro, que, en cambio, contribuye a éxitos académicos de estudiantes. Eduque distritos en Carolina del sur utilizan el Ayudar, Desarrollar y Evaluar a a Profesional que Enseña (ADEPT) sistema. Un componente de ADEPT es el Summative Evaluación ADEPT de Formal de Maestros de Aula-Basó (SAFE-T). El propósito de este estudio fue de investigar las percepciones de maestros de conferencia con reacción. Las conclusiones indican que observaciones deben ocurrir con frecuencia y por un espacio de tiempo prolongado. Además, reacción sistemática es crítica para un maestro a mejorar desempeño, el motivo y satisfacción personal. Por último, una estructura, como la conferencia, debe estar en el lugar de promover indagación y conversaciones reflectoras para facilitar que aprende de maestros. Es el deseo de los autores que otros quizás utilicen estos resultados tan un trampolín para la discusión como revisan su proceso de evaluación.

> NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

2 Introduction

Research indicates a critical link between effective teaching and students' academic achievement. Mathers, Oliva & Laine (2008) state that the role of teacher evaluations has surfaced as a "tool to promote teacher professional growth and measure teacher effectiveness in the classroom" (p. 1). Teacher evaluation serves two fundamental purposes: "quality assurance and professional learning" (Danielson 2007, p. 64). Glickman(2002) believes that teacher evaluation assists in providing a forum, structure and a plan for teachers and evaluators to reflect, change and assess professional practice. When used appropriately, teacher evaluations identify and measure the instructional strategies, professional behaviors and delivery of content knowledge that affect student learning (Danielson & McGreal, 2000).

One of the problems hindering teachers' classroom instruction has been the lack of frequent observations which can create bias results. Research suggests that when observations occur frequently, their reliability improves (Denner, Miller, Newsome & Birdsong (2002) and when observations are longer, their validity improves (Cronin & Capie, 1986).

In addition, there is an absence of systematic feedback for teachers to facilitate their professional growth and improve instruction. Donaldson (2010) concludes that evaluators tend not to provide detailed and concrete feedback after they have observed teachers. Frase (1992) states that feedback has often been "inaccurate, shallow and at times mean spirited, rather than helpful and uplifting" (p. 179). Feeney (2007) determines that "Constructive and meaningful feedback is needed to promote reflection and allow teachers to plan and achieve new goals, which will ultimately lead to an increased sense of efficacy in their teaching" (p. 193). According to Covey (1991), without objective feedback and regular reports on progress and performance, an individual is less likely to achieve his or her professional goals. Constructive and meaningful feedback is needed to promote reflection and allow teachers to plan and achieve new goals, which will ultimately lead to an increased sense of efficacy in their teaching. Quality feedback should support teachers in making decisions about what to teach and how to teach to better meet the needs of their students (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 2007). An evaluation has no meaning if it is not interpreted, questioned, discussed and reflected on, ultimately leading to making different and more effective decisions (Feeney, 2007).

Several studies have been conducted relating to teacher feedback. Turnbull, Haslam, Arcaira, Riley, Sinclair & Coleman (2009) found in their study that principals spend less time in providing feedback to teachers than on observations. The study also reported that teachers in several schools stated that their principals provided no individual feedback, choosing instead to focus on group feedback based on a checklist criteria. Also, Arlestig (2008) conducted a study of 24 principals in secondary schools and found that few classroom observations were conducted and rarely were teachers provided feedback. To add further,

Kelley and Maslow (2005) concluded in their study that meaningful feedback for teacher learning beyond the probationary period did not occur for experienced teachers.

To provide quality focused feedback, a structure needs to occur to promote reflective inquiry and conversations for facilitating the learning of teachers. Conferencing facilitates a collaborative reflective dialogue after a lesson has been observed. According to Feeney (2007), "When a structure to promote reflective inquiry is provided, teachers are more likely to internalize the feedback and make adjustments to improve their teaching" (p. 195).

Issued by the South Carolina Department of Education and ratified by the state government in 2002 and updated in 2010, all school districts in South Carolina use the Assisting, Developing and Evaluating Professional Teaching (ADEPT) system. The ADEPT system addresses teacher performance through three primary processes: assisting, developing and evaluating. The Summative ADEPT Formal Evaluation of Classroom-Based Teachers (SAFE-T) is designed to promote quality teaching through performance standards identified in planning, instruction, environment and professionalism (Danielson, 2007).

ADEPT is encompassed by the idea of evaluating teachers directly throughout the first two years of teaching while moving them toward continuing status and yearly Goals Based Evaluation (GBE) after year two of teaching. Thereafter, the evaluation process becomes very different from that of an induction and annual contract teacher. An annual contract teacher is not required to be evaluated. Rather, the teacher writes personal and professional goals that he/she wants to accomplish within five years.

This study focused on one large school district in South Carolina who uses the ADEPT and SAFE-T system to address teacher performance, as well as Classroom Walk-Throughs (CWT). The CWT focuses on student learning and achievement through compilation of data that shows trends. The purpose is to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses in classroom instruction and work towards improvement. The CWT is non-evaluative. Its design is for the "big picture" in instruction not just one classroom. The idea is that once trends are determined identifying strengths and weaknesses, professional development can be arranged for teacher. The CWT model does not differentiate among teachers' experience level and every school uses the same CWT instrument regardless of grade level or setting. Therefore, the assessment tools mostly commonly used in the school district are ones meant for annual assessment of teacher quality and data collection on groups of educators.

The use of the SAFE-T, GBE and CWT utilized by the school district in South Carolina is in place. While the teacher is required to submit a reflection based on each observation with SAFE-T, the teacher receives no feedback until the process is completed at the end of the year. Moreover, because the GBE lacks a required number of classroom observations for teachers on continuing contract, a teacher may not receive any formal observations for several years. Also, the CWT does not provide individual teacher feedback but rather trends occurring in a school. Lastly, the structure in place for conferencing with the teacher takes place in the Summative Year-End evaluation process.

Despite research on frequent observations, systematic feedback and a structure, (conferencing), necessary for teacher growth and ultimately, student learning, many teachers are not receiving such to promote reflective inquiry and self-directedness to foster improvements in teaching supported by evidence of student learning (Glickman, 2002). This article aims at providing insight into teacher's subjective interpretations of their experiences with observations, conferencing and feedback. Understanding teacher's perspectives can shed light in re-designing meaningful evaluation instruments and assist school leaders in future planning.

3 Method

This is an Action Research Project using qualitative data to investigate the experiences of teachers who volunteered to participate in classroom observations with face-to-face conferencing feedback. The quality of action research depends on the extent to which it addresses a significant problem in the organization, is guided by a reflexive concern for practical outcomes and includes a plurality of knowing (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). For this district at this time, the necessity to provide specific and systematic feedback through pre and post conferencing became a matter of urgency in a country that struggles with educating children. The action research approach (Herr & Anderson, 2005) meant that administrators and

participants deliberately reflected on what was working and what needed improvement with reference to the district's ultimate goal of improving teacher effectiveness and improving professional growth.

3.1 Participants

Three elementary schools were selected to participate in this study based upon the assistant principal in each school who conducted the research. One elementary school has an enrollment of 1100 students. Another elementary school has an enrollment of 630 students, while the third elementary school has an enrollment of 525 students. Participants ranged in experience from one year to 28 years, with the average number of teaching experience being 15 years.

While the school district does not afford teachers the opportunity for pre and post conferencing as well as observational feedback until the end of year Summative Evaluation, this was a new experience for teachers and skepticism was evident. Thirty-seven out of 135 teachers agreed to participate in the study during the school year 2009-2010.

Three assistant principals representing each elementary school conducted five observations per teacher, 60 minutes per observation and pre and post conferences involving descriptive observable data with feedback.

Each participant in this study was offered the opportunity to pre-conference before the initial observation. Eighty-eight percent of the participants participated in the pre-conference. Of those who chose not to participate in the pre-conference, the main reason cited was that they were "a bit uncomfortable with this since they had no experience prior to this with a pre-conference." One hundred percent of participants participated in the post-conference. This high rate of participants was due to a number of factors. First, each participant received five classroom observations of sixty minutes with written focused feedback. Because of the quality of the feedback, participants wanted to post-conference. Also, participants became more trusting and comfortable with the relationship of the assistant principal conducting the observation as evident by one participant, "I don't fear the administrator in my room as I know she is helping me. I want to know more. Definitely, I have established a trusting relationship with her."

3.2 Procedures

After the Action Research was completed, a follow-up survey was administered and all thirty- seven participants completed the survey relating to observation, conferencing and feedback. For the purpose of considering participants' perceptions, open-ended questions were placed into three strands: conferencing, feedback and process.

4 Data Analysis and Findings

Using the framework for Action Research and supported by the literature on teacher evaluation, conferencing and feedback, several themes emerged from the teachers' perspectives as to the benefits of conferencing and feedback. The following themes emerged from the survey data. First, frequent and extended observations are needed before the summative evaluation used in ADEPT and SAFE-T. Next, formative feedback needs to occur throughout the year to identify ways to improve performance and should be based on descriptive observable data based on the ADEPT and SAFE-T system (Danielson's Framework for Teaching) that the district utilizes. Lastly, a structure, such as conferencing, needs to be in place after each observation rather than at the end of the year Summative Conference to foster reflective inquiry and conversations for facilitating the learning of teachers.

4.1 Pre and Post Conferencing

Twenty-one percent of the 88% participating in the pre-conference had been involved in pre-conferencing before at another school district. Seventy-nine percent of the 100% participating in the post conference had been involved in post conferencing either at another school district or in this school district. We believe that

the larger number participating in post-conferencing is due to the fact that the school district administrator does meet at the end of the year with the teacher to go over ADEPT or GBE.

When responding to the survey as to how face-to-face conferencing benefitted participants, all of the teachers who participated in the pre and/or post conferences felt that the conferences were positive and assisted them in their professional growth. Responses included such terms as problem solving, analyzing data, idea sharing, coaching, personal approach, brainstorming, open communication and equal discussion were among such. One teacher notes, "It has benefitted me greatly because we were able to discuss things. Our assistant principal didn't continue to wonder about things as I was able to explain them. It allowed for us to share some wonderful ideas, suggestions and comments." According to another teacher, "Face-to-face conferencing helps me to truly understand the observer's feelings because I was able to get further explanation and share my thoughts about what was observed." Another teacher responded in this manner, "I think the chance for open conversation and listening to the comments in that person's own words gives you the full benefit of the process. You truly understand what she observed in your room." Lastly, as one teacher states, "With face-to-face conferencing, the assistant principal explained what was written on the sheet when data was collected. She even gave examples of certain situations and now I can work on the suggestions immediately rather than wait until the end of the year and make the same mistakes." All 37 participants responded that nothing takes the place of face-to-face conferencing nor can the same information be relayed in an email or a little note left on the desk after the observation. Face-to-face discussion is more powerful and has a greater impact.

4.2 Feedback

Participants were asked if the type of feedback provided to them reinforced quality teaching and student learning. All respondents agreed that the feedback allowed them to reflect on all aspects of their teaching. Responses range from helpful with planning future lessons, utilizing a variety of instructional strategies, classroom management suggestions to learning to be a reflective practitioner. As one teacher responded, "I found this experience helpful when planning future lessons. I could look back to see what strategies that I seemed to use a lot and incorporate other strategies into my future lessons. I was also uplifted by the positive feedback. Just like our students, we need authentic praise. This type of nonthreatening feedback is much more helpful. The entire district needs to do this." Another teacher stated, "After considering the feedback given, it is easy to make changes and adjust lesson and teaching styles to make lessons more effective. It really allowed me to look at my teaching approach." According to another teacher, "I'm probably my worst critic so I felt it most helpful to hear from our administrator about the good and the bad. I loved the immediate feedback as so often we are observed but feedback is rarely given." Finally, a teacher noted, "I feel very fortunate to participate in this study. I was provided with quality feedback that was valuable and helped me improve my instruction.

4.3 Process and Frequent Observations

Participants were asked if they felt that they would like to continue with the process observation and conferencing with feedback and if so how frequent should the observations occur. As to how often the observations should occur, 17% responded bi-weekly, 49% responded monthly, 13% responded quarterly and 21% responded as often as possible. However, all participants in this study ardently stated that no matter how often the observations occurred that they would like to receive specific feedback on observable data each time. A teacher stated that, "I would like feedback every time; however, I know that this may be hard to do. The feedback allows me to continue with rich conversations as we reflect on the observations." Another teacher noted, "I think that it was great to receive specific feedback. I wouldn't mind having this process at least once every nine weeks or so to remind all us that we are doing the right thing in our teaching." Another teacher responded in this manner, "Once every two weeks would be great and helpful. It will give us a chance to consider the feedback and change or improve what needs to be addressed in order to enhance quality teaching."

    All 37 teachers who participated in this study wanted to continue with this process and would encourage others to volunteer. Respondents believed that the entire process was extremely valuable, enriching and worthwhile. According to one teacher, "After my first observation lasted an hour, I was wondering why in the world did I sign up for this. However, I cannot believe the positive constructive feedback that I received. This process should occur all the time." As another teacher stated, "At first I had forgotten that I had signed up for it and I was unusually nervous to have an administrator in my classroom for such an extended period of time. After I realized that she was there to provide constructive feedback, things went better. I'd participate in this process again." Furthermore, a teacher provided another perspective, "I thoroughly enjoy being part of this process. It helped me realize that I am doing the right thing every day in my teaching. It was nice to hear the good things that were observed. It was also nice to discuss how lessons could be improved or extended. I really enjoyed the face-to-face conference about my lessons and such positive feedback."

5 Conclusions

While this is a small-scale action research study, the results of this study reinforce that teachers often times do not experience frequent and extended observations, systematic feedback and a structure to promote reflective inquiry. The process of evaluation should involve conferencing and feedback that will lead teachers to construct their own understandings and set professional goals that are measured in terms of student learning. According to Wheatley (2005),

5.1

We want to use measurement to give us the kind and quality of feedback that supports and welcomes people to step forward with their desire to contribute, to learn and to achieve. We want measurement to be used from a deeper place of understanding, the understanding that the real capacity of an organization arises when colleagues willingly struggle together in common work that they find meaningful (p. 162).

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