 Elements of Professional Supervision

Edward Mirasty

Wilkes University

ED 625 – Elements of Supervision

Allan Hack, Doctorate of Education

February 25th, 2018

**Introduction**

In the wake of increased accountability and transparency amongst schools and teachers, education leaders are finding a vast array of resources within their existing school systems that can calibrate organizational change with improved student learning outcomes. For example, the Danielson Framework is a tool that can be adopted to help guide education leaders bring parallels to existing teaching practices and using data to make adjustments with teaching methodologies. This paper will examine five themes specific to improving supervision; purpose of supervision, theory and methods, ethics, legal and multicultural priorities, roles and responsibilities of administrators and specific methods and theories for supervision.

**Purpose of Supervision**

The purpose of supervision is to create efficacy in professional teaching methods that align with national and international education standards. School districts must employ a variety of data-driven strategies to create parallels with state/provincial curriculum standards to ensure student succeed in school. Clerical arguments for investing in education have merit, but it is not the panacea for improving results. For instance, Springs (2011) argues, “the most effective school resources proved to be… related to innovative teaching, staff development, planning time, teacher control and efficacy, and certain student support services,” (p. 263). Effective upervision of teachers is one key ingredient to ensuring consistencies to school improvement initiatives.

Supervision is a process where educational practitioners can observe and evaluate other teacher’s pedagogical approach and teaching methodologies with the Danielson Framework. By measuring teacher performance, school administrators, teachers and superintendents can use the four domains to assess the effectiveness of teaching practice. Essentially, the process is not to create a “gotcha” mentality where teachers are afraid of supervision, but to focus on improving teacher performance so that the by-product is improving student learning. Principals will be instrumental in creating that shared understanding linked to Provincial standards and the school’s strategic goals.

The development of local supervision programs can be made up of local professional development committees consisting of teachers, administration, business and parent groups. Through a carefully orchestrated plan, the committee can develop three-year professional growth plan to submit to school district ensuring purpose and outcomes are consistent with state/provincial curriculum outcomes. The school professional growth plans must reflect current data that is derived from demographic, formative and summative assessments consistent with the organization’s strategic plan.

Supervision plans should reflect professional development planning made up from the local supervision committee. Most “in-house” professional development planning requires time within a system and administrators need to be cognizant of this key factor. As a follow-up to supervision, there must be an investment of time where teachers can collaborate, share data, and revise methodologies using research-based programs. This adjustment during the work-day will go a long way in creating a learning environment conducive to a culture of learning. If there is to be an alignment of strategies to improve student learning outcomes, then assessments, supervision and coordinated ‘in-house’ time allotments with resources must be a priority.

To stop the fragmentation of teaching methodologies and pedagogies, there should be a standardization of professional development planning. For instance, there needs to be a direct link between provincial curriculum that guide teachers’ focus on specific learning outcomes which are codified in school and district-wide goals. Secondly, there should be policies in place to balance congruency on teacher professional development and supervision initiatives. This will be the role of school professional development committees.

**Theory and Methods Relevant to Supervision**

There are a variety of methods that various schools are employing to ensure there are follow-ups to supervision. For instance, the differentiated supervision practices used at Warrior Run School District covers formal, self and team-led supervision methods. Supervision should also be job embedded with time for teachers to decipher and analyze the data with various colleagues that some call professional learning communities. When Professional Learning Communities are embedded in school programs, time is the biggest determinant to successful “in-house” professional development. These theoretical approaches to cater to the constructivist approach to teacher evaluation using the Danielson Framework, administrators must make provisions for time allotment for these initiatives to improve teacher performances. As one principal added under a PLC team determinant as Jenkins (2012) cites in her study;

“When you try to take teachers who have been here since 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning, have taught all day, have tutored and worked with kids all day long, and go to a 2:15 – 3:15 and try to have a staff development with them that makes any kind of sense, or is useful, it’s just not going to work” (p. 89).

The culture of the school can be symptomatic of an effective professional learning environment. In small schools for example, the chances of increased collaboration and teacher learning communities are more collegial and consequently, respond to challenges in student learning in a more inclusive and strategic way. For instance, according to Hall and Hord (2007) these “change-ready” staff are invited by the principal to co-construct professional development planning which responds for effectively to students’ learning needs and determine allocation of resources.

**The Major Roles and Responsibilities**

School administrators must play an important role in the orchestration and maintenance of a professional development plans. Principals will play a pivotal role in developing effective strategies by what Hall and Hord (2007) write, act as a “guide on the side” (p. 32). This strategy allows for various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, guidance counselors, etc., to be involved in the collaboration needed to create a culture of learning. As Hall and Hord (2007) add, “…the role of leaders is to support the conversations with the physical conditions necessary for the staff to meet: time, a location, and policies that supported the time that the staff invests in its community conversations” (p. 33).

**Ethical, Legal and Multicultural Considerations**

When supervision policies are implemented within a school system, it must meet ethical, legal and multicultural considerations. From an ethical perspective, there must be cultural and social congruency within the system to ensure professional evaluation standards are reflective of the Danielson Framework. For instance, Domain 4 of the Danielson Framework called professional responsibilities, teachers need to be versed in the local customs of a community. Introducing novice teachers through an inductee program will give them an understanding of some of the local protocols and procedures. A breach of teacher conduct outside of the school has as much to say of their ethical standards in and outside the school.

From a legal perspective, evaluation procedures and protocols must be codified and placed into local school policy manuals. Currently, there is no standardization within many First Nations-led schools in Saskatchewan to define teacher evaluation process. Thus, the Danielson Framework would be instrumental in creating a legal and professional framework that can measure effective teaching practices. The four domains will allow schools to guide administrators on evaluating teachers and provide consistencies to behavior and practices.

Lastly, given the cultural mosaic of Canada’s diverse populations and the trending of immigration to the learning communities, supervision and professional assessments must reflect these dynamics in the classroom. As teachers follow domain one and two of the Danielson framework, there must be an evaluation component on preparing and planning reflected in the classroom environment. Participating in cultural events, community-oriented activities must be recognized in a teacher’s evaluation as to place emphasis on the organization’s recognition of cultural continuity within the academic world.

**Theories and Methods**

The ideal supervision method that would work with learning communities would be to implement a strategic supervision practice, inclusive of various levels of teacher supervision. One good example would be the Warrior Run School District Professional Growth and Evaluation Plan. The infrastructure allows for consistencies and key attributes for inclusiveness in supervision that would work within the learning community. For example, the Warrior Run Professional Growth Plan and Evaluation Plan includes provisions for, “New Teacher Induction, Differentiated Instruction (formal observation, self-directed study and team-directed study), Intensive Supervision, State Evaluation Criteria and Act 48 Professional Development Committee,” (p. 4).

Under differentiated instruction for instance, there can be a multitude of ways for administrators to employ self and team directed studies that accommodate and enhance teacher supervision. For instance, within a team approach, teachers can decide to develop a study group amongst the staff and with the guidance of school administrators, tackle specific issues and concerns effecting student learning. The study group can utilize local professions in an interagency approach involving the community health nurse, local police, youth workers, etc. The action-research methodology would be instrumental in keeping school goals as the main driving force and the by-product would be improved strategies for student engagement.

When it comes to supervision, new inductees can learn a lot from the school learning community that improves student performance. For instance, under the Warrior Run School District, new teachers are introduced to a two-year performance evaluation process that is subject to multiple formal evaluations from the administration or district leader.

For new inductees, teacher mentors and coaches would go a long way in providing added support to the new education practitioner. These certified mentors and coaches would meet with the new teachers during the orientation phase while playing different roles once they work with the teachers at the school level. For instance, mentors can work throughout the school year with the new teacher and provide advice on methodologies, resource development and assessment strategies to measure student outcomes. Unlike the mentor, the coach will not be involved in the supervision of the new teacher, but be a resource and support for the new inductee. The mentor will work with the administration in the overall professional development plan of the new teacher and ensure success to teacher evaluation and student learning.

Similar to the Induction Plan Guidelines in the Pennsylvania Department of Education, there are a variety of processes that can assist new teachers. To begin with, there should be an induction committee established amongst educators in the school. The committee can consist of veteran teachers, education specialists, inductees and administration who submit their plans once every six years. The emphasis of the program should be for developing capacity for instruction, deciphering and planning on provincial curriculum standards with the assistance of a qualified teacher mentor. New inductees should be encouraged to keep a journal so they can reflect on their teaching experience.

Developing collegiality approaches for supervision in school culture is hindered by trust and teacher isolation. That is why a new induction program for beginning teachers could be co-constructed with various team-building exercises that will deter isolation. For instance, a core group of teachers with the same grade and/or group of students can build a culture of learning with some simple activities. For instance, within and district, there are a lot of teachers that take 120 minutes of driving per day. Principals could capitalize on this drive by allowing car poolers to leave earlier at least twice a week to have dialogue on specific content. Even principals feel exhausted at the end of the school day that using the 3:30-4:00 ritual to conduct PLC does not allow for teacher collaboration. Instead, give a carpool team a specific learning topic and have them discuss and prepare a written response by the next staff meeting. Since one of the most challenging times for “in-house” administrators is to find time and/or allocate subs to cover for professional development, why not allow a study group such as car-poolers develop capacity?

As Hall and Hord (2007) explains, building supportive conditions would go a long way in building physical conditions and people capacities within a learning community. As Hall and Hord (2007) explain, “Supportive conditions prepares the infrastructure… of the when, where, and how this staff can collectively come together as a whole to learn, to make decisions, to do creative problem-solving, and to implement new practices-actions that are characteristic of the PLC,” (p. 28). This collaboration could be also facilitated by having the team of teachers gather at the local ice cream parlor and/or take turns in hosting a potluck at each other’s home. Such a policy would foster better working relationships amongst colleagues as well as prevent teachers from working in isolation.

Teaching is a profession that has been defined as a culture that ‘eats its own’. Unlike engineers who take and apprentice their new recruits to co-construct a new project, teachers are left alone in their classroom with a ‘sink or swim’ mentality increasing isolation and fragmentation. This does more harm than good for educators, administrators and political leaders need to understand that if we truly believe that a community is as strong as its weakest members, than educational institutions should not be any different. A strategic plan, coupled with collegial support and administration creating policy and resources for PLC’s can generate the type of learning communities that improve student outcomes. Goals and measurement tools will be essential ingredients for any organization that proposes to influence change and motivate teachers to capitalize on their strengths, not weaknesses.

One important incentive that would bring compliance immediately to systems who need immediate compliance to improve results, is to leverage school performance to staff salary. As Schmoker (2006) writes;

…linking compensation to evaluation would send a ringing message throughout the system: because coherent curriculum and effective instruction are so manifestly vital toward children and their futures, these practices will be meaningfully evaluated-and rewarded. Schools will no longer wink at shoddy practice and curricular chaos while students’ lives hang in the balance. This linkage would demonstrate, to teachers new or veteran, to governments and communities, that public education has acquired a higher level of competence and integrity. (p.141).

This draconian policy would deter many existing teacher unions and education practitioners who are comfortable in their isolated conditions, but if schools need immediate change, then supervision methodologies would gain momentum with this change to policy.

Conclusion

When supervision of teachers is left to a minimalistic process, teacher practices and work performance can be static and outdated. There has to be codified policies, measurement tools and research-based initiatives that can engage students and provide a strong educated workforce for communities. It’s not enough to have a one-year window to review and supervise teachers, but must be done periodically through a three to five-year process and expect professional development to be a re-occurring theme for veteran teachers. Supervision programs delivered in a consistent and data-driven environment will allow teams, mentors, administrators and parents see the validity of teacher improvement.

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