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# Preface

**L**eadership in schools implies instructional leadership. All educators who exercise either formal or informal leadership (site administrators, department chairs, team leaders, curriculum coordinators, instructional coaches, or informal teacher leaders) have the responsibility to use their influence and positional authority to ensure high levels of student learning. This sometimes involves challenging accepted wisdom; at other times, it means contributing new insights or the results of recent research findings.

Teaching is enormously complex work, and enhancing one's skill is a career-long endeavor. New discoveries about teaching and learning are made on an ongoing basis; it is an obligation of every teacher, and a mark of true professionalism, to stay abreast of developments in the subjects they teach and in the associated principles of pedagogy. Ongoing learning, in other words, is inherent to the responsibility of teaching. Supporting that learning, therefore, is an essential obligation of instructional leadership.

So what contributes to and promotes teacher learning? How can school leaders ensure a culture of professional inquiry in which such learning is accepted as an essential component of the work of teaching and in which such teacher learning is maximized? What are the mechanisms through which teacher learning occurs?

An important mechanism to promote teacher learning, in addition to the traditional approaches of professional reading and workshops, is that of conversation. Through focused and occasionally structured conversation, teachers are encouraged to think deeply about their work, to reflect on their approaches and student responses. And yet conducting such conversations requires skill. Many teachers assume that if their principal or supervisor wants to discuss the events in a classroom it means that there is something wrong or that there is a concern. But by neglecting to engage in professional conversations with teachers, educational leaders decline to take advantage of one of the most powerful approaches at their disposal to promote teacher learning.

There are three different categories of professional conversations:

- Formal reflective conversations following a formal observation conducted for the purpose of teacher evaluation
- Coaching conversations, in which the teacher invites an administrator or colleague to provide another set of eyes in providing feedback on some specific aspect of practice
- Informal professional conversations that follow a principal's brief, unannounced observations of a class

The first two of these types of conversations, formal reflective conversations and coaching conversations, have been fully described in the professional literature. The last informal professional conversations have not yet been explored. However, they may have the greatest potential to affect practice. They are the focus of this book.

## **PURPOSE AND INTENT**

The primary purpose of this book is twofold: (1) To help educators appreciate the value of meaningful conversations about teaching, to recognize how such conversations make a material contribution to teacher learning, and (2) to provide all educators with the "mental maps" and practical tools to enable them to conduct meaningful, although frequently informal, professional conversations about practice.

Many educators in positions of formal leadership appreciate the importance of being "out and about" in their schools, of dropping in on classrooms. They understand that they can only begin to serve as resources to their teachers if they are not even informed about teachers' styles and strengths. However, they also find themselves uncertain as to how to conduct the conversations that follow a brief observation. "Now what?" they think. Should I leave a note in the classroom as I exit the room? If so, what should it say? Or should I leave a note in the teacher's box? Or should we have a more formal conference? And if I ask to set up a conference, won't the teacher think that there's something wrong? It is this book's intent to answer these questions.

## **AUDIENCE**

This book is intended to be useful to all educators who are in a position to initiate and conduct conversations with teachers about their practice. Therefore, the readers who will find it most useful are those with formal

authority, whose position descriptions contain the responsibility to drop in on classrooms. This includes principals and assistant principals, department chairs, team leaders, instructional coaches, and the like. Some of these individuals also have supervisory responsibility; that fact causes the relationship with teachers to have a different flavor than those in which both parties are professional colleagues of equal authority.

Of course, all educators, not only those with positional authority, can have rich and powerful conversations about practice. That is, the principles in this book have important value for all teachers to use in their interactions with one another, in working out important challenges of teaching or in determining a better approach in introducing a new concept. In many respects, the conversations among teachers can be the most productive of all, because there is no cloud of possible judgment infusing either what has been observed in the classroom or the conversation that ensues.

## ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

This book is intended as a practical guide to informal professional conversations for practitioners. As such, it is designed for busy people and for those who take seriously their responsibility to promote high-level learning for students and continuing learning for teachers. But these powerful conversations don't happen simply as a consequence of goodwill; they must also be informed by the mental maps of understanding about important content, students, and their learning.

The first chapters in the book, therefore, contains the mental maps.

- Chapter 1 (“Why Professional Conversations?”) provides a rationale for informal professional conversations. It explains why they are so critical in supporting ongoing teacher learning.
- Chapter 2 (“Power and Leadership in Schools”) offers an overview of the critical nature of the interaction of power and leadership in schools and how this interaction influences the nature of professional conversation.
- Chapter 3 (“The Big Ideas That Shape Professional Conversations”) provides a summary of the “big ideas” that underlie every educator’s decisions in the classroom: what we know about how students learn, how they are motivated, and the implications of this research for mobilizing student energy in the classroom.

The middle chapters of the book provide guidance on the heart of informal professional conversations.

- In Chapter 4 (“The Topics for Conversation”), the possible topics, derived from the big ideas of Chapter 3, are explored. These are aspects of the learning environment such as clarity of purpose, intellectual rigor, and the like that are part of any conversation. Naturally, a specific conversation will be stimulated by the actual events of a classroom. But the conversation will almost certainly contain matters for which the big ideas of Chapter 3 can provide insight and perspective.

- Chapter 5 (“Conversation Skills”) offers an overview of the specific skills needed by observers of teaching to use in their conversations with teachers. These conversation skills are derived from the literature in cognitive coaching and include matters such as setting the tone, inviting thinking, and linguistic skills such as probing and paraphrasing. The use of these skills helps make informal professional conversations rich without being threatening.

- Chapter 6 (“Informal Professional Conversations”) provides practical guidance for conducting informal professional conversations, taking into account the different situations resulting from whether a teacher is probationary or tenured or whether the observer holds supervisory responsibility. These different situations have an impact on how the conversations are conducted.

In the last two chapters, the practical details of implementing the ideas in this book are explored.

- Chapter 7 (“Implementation Issues”) explores the challenges inherent in promoting professional conversations, ranging from finding the time for such conversations to the sometimes daunting challenge of establishing an environment of trust in which such conversations can occur. It also provides guidance as to the issues involved in forging consensus around the big ideas described in Chapter 3. This requires leadership in facilitating discussion, helping teachers apply research findings to their own settings, and guiding the school in forging its own approach to the challenges of effecting high-level learning for students.

- In Chapter 8 (“Conversation Activities for Implementation”), specific protocols are provided for facilitating conversations surrounding the important big ideas and their implications for practice. The protocols are highly specific with suggested questions, materials (if needed) to support the conversations, and likely outcomes of the discussions. These conversations will lead, no doubt, to other investigations that individuals within the school will want to undertake to apply the principles discussed to their own settings.