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Why Professional Conversation?

Virtually every educator has experienced the professional rewards that result from rich conversations about practice. Routinely, comments from teachers following a workshop mention that the most positive aspect of the session was the opportunity to engage in dialogue with colleagues. Even when a workshop's nominal purpose is something quite different, for example, observing in classrooms using the framework for teaching, participants report the experience to have been highly rewarding because of the discussions. As they say, "It's all about the conversation." It's through conversation that teachers clarify their beliefs and plans and examine, practice, and consider new possibilities.

Most conversations about teaching are grounded in what has been observed in a classroom, but such conversations can be fruitful even when that is not possible or when the observation is very brief. What is important is that the conversation is enhanced by the skill of those conducting it to dig below the surface, to help teachers examine underlying assumptions and likely consequences of different approaches. With skilled facilitation, conversations can help a teacher reflect deeply on their practice and see patterns of both student behavior and the results of teacher actions.

An essential responsibility of every site administrator is to create a culture of professional inquiry among the faculty. For years, teaching has been characterized by privacy and isolation; many teachers are so completely consumed by the challenges of preparing for the next day that they don't take the time, nor exercise the discipline, required to reflect on their own practices and to learn from it. Similarly, they aren't able to either share their expertise with other teachers or learn from that of their colleagues. Most schools, then,

are not learning organizations or professional communities of inquiry. Instead, they are collections of individuals working, under frequently difficult conditions, essentially alone.

And yet the work of teaching is so challenging and so complex that it's essential for teachers to take every opportunity to strengthen their practice. Observations of teaching and professional conversations (among teachers and between teachers and supervisors) are an important vehicle for creating the community of inquiry so essential to ongoing learning.

Many principals report that their teachers welcome them in their classrooms, and they report them saying things like "come in any time." Indeed, some teachers express discontent that they see so little of their administrators around the school; they are doing things in their classrooms that they say they would like to show off to their supervisors. But it's unlikely that these sentiments express the full range of emotions experienced by teachers. For many teachers, whenever a supervisor enters a teacher's class, for whatever purpose, the teacher is likely to experience a tightening of the stomach, a visceral fear, that the supervisor will observe something not to his or her liking. They tighten up; the students pick up on the changed chemistry in the room and are likely to shift to good behavior mode. The two—the teacher and the supervisor—do not hold, after all, equal power in the hierarchy of the school; it is a rare teacher who when a principal walks in does not quickly consider what the class looks like through the eyes of a visitor. The result is typically apprehension and anxiety on the part of the teacher.

Even when the teacher has tenure, it is difficult to believe that the observer is not somehow being judgmental; this belief may be even more pronounced when the observer is another teacher. But because of the power differential between teachers and administrators, the anxiety experienced by teachers when an administrator enters the class is likely to be acute. To reduce that anxiety and increase the possibility that professional conversations are productive, it's essential for teachers to know what to expect. This book addresses all these issues, with the aim of helping all educators engage in professional conversations that are as productive as possible.

THE IMPERATIVE FOR IMPROVEMENT IN TEACHING

It is now accepted wisdom that of all the factors contributing to student learning, schools account for roughly half the differences in student achievement from one student (or groups of students) to another. Other

factors include the income and education level of the parents, which exert enormous influence over the stability of a child's upbringing and available opportunities. It remains the case, as it has been since it was first reported by James Coleman in the 1960s, that family background and parents' levels of education play a critical role in the educational attainment of students. The demonstrated importance of home environment has led to the establishment of nutrition programs for breakfast and lunch, family outreach programs, and contacts with social service agencies.

In addition, schools themselves are complex systems with many moving parts, such as the richness of the curriculum, the general tone of the school, and the availability of support services and extracurricular activities for students. However, in spite of these factors, the single most important factor under the control of the school influencing the degree of student learning is the quality of teaching. Thus, a school committed to the improvement of learning must be equally committed to improving the quality of teaching. Such a commitment does not reflect a belief in instructional deficiency. Policymakers and practitioners who advocate professional development for teachers are not arguing that teaching is of poor quality and must be fixed. Not at all; their advocacy for professional development for teachers reflects the recognition that teaching is so *hard* that it is never perfect; no matter how good a lesson is, it could always be improved. As Lee Shulman (2004) has noted, "After 30 years of doing such work, I have concluded that classroom teaching . . . is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented" (p. 504).

Furthermore, not only is there an imperative for teaching to improve, this imperative is an ongoing commitment. That is, teachers, like other professionals, must be engaged in a career-long quest to advance their knowledge and skill; it's not an effort that has been completed by the time teachers have attained a tenured position or have been successful in the profession for a given number of years. That is, professional learning is not an add-on to the daunting responsibilities of teaching; it is *integral to* those responsibilities. The belief that once teachers have completed their preparation programs they are somehow set for their careers is hopelessly outmoded. If it were ever the case, it simply is not today.

THE NATURE OF TEACHER LEARNING

When we understand the importance of ongoing teacher learning for the success of schools, then it's essential to consider how best to promote that learning. This is not a new question; schools have conducted inservice

sessions for decades. However, most educators now recognize the ineffectiveness of workshops and presentations in which the teachers' role is a passive one. These are increasingly recognized to be ineffective in improving teacher thinking or changing practice.

When deciding how best to promote teacher learning, it's important to remember that teacher learning is *learning* and that educators can apply what they know about learning to it. Although it's true that adults are different in important respects from children (they have far greater experience, for example) the principles of learning are identical. In a nutshell, what is known about learning, whether by children or adults, is that learning is done by the *learner* through an active intellectual process. That is, for teachers to learn, it's important for the teacher to be the one doing the intellectual work.

When considered in this light, the limitations of feedback, as typically provided, become evident. From the teacher's standpoint, the experience of listening to suggestions by a supervisor, or even a colleague, is a completely passive one. Indeed, the entire observation/supervision places the teacher in a passive role, and it helps to explain why the typical observation process yields such little value to teachers. In a traditional observation, the supervisor visits the classroom, the supervisor takes notes, the supervisor writes up the observation notes, the supervisor returns, and the supervisor tells the teacher about the lesson. It's important to recognize who is doing the work—the supervisor! Actually, all that's necessary for the teacher is that he or she *endures* the conference; eventually, the supervisor will stop talking, and the teacher can leave. Thus, it is scarcely surprising that teachers don't learn much as a consequence of the traditional supervision process; they aren't *doing* anything.

The same may be said of many traditional inservice offerings for teachers, often dismissed as "sit 'n git" sessions. In many of these workshops, which teachers are usually required to attend, an expert, typically from outside the school or district, makes a formal presentation to which teachers listen passively. Even if the workshop is interactive, the activities and the topics addressed are determined by others. Following the session, the teachers return to their classrooms and their normal routines. The presenter may indeed be an expert, with important information and insights to share, but teachers are unlikely to learn much from the session if they don't have the opportunity to engage in the difficult work of applying the content to their own situation and context.

Educators have discovered that when they change their approaches to professional learning, they get dramatically different results. In some schools, designated teachers have been trained as instructional coaches and the schedule organized to provide opportunities for them to engage in

deep conversations with their colleagues. In other schools, teachers participate in study groups and joint planning. Most of these approaches involve teachers in formal roles, sometimes with a title of department chair or team leader. The role provides them with the *mandate* to engage their colleagues in conversations about practice, from which important learning can emerge.

Such conversations may also be initiated by administrators and can also yield powerful learning. And because administrators typically have supervisory responsibilities, the conversations carry a subtext of judgment. This unequal distribution of power within a school's organization is one of the realities that must be recognized and is addressed in Chapter 2, "Power and Leadership in Schools." Moreover, an administrator's formal position provides him or her with the natural authority to initiate and sustain discussion on the important concepts that underlie instructional planning and student learning. This issue is addressed in Chapter 3, "The Big Ideas That Shape Professional Conversations." The conversations about teaching are the vehicle through which the school's vision for student learning is both articulated and realized.

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH CONVERSATION

Of all the approaches available to educators to promote teacher learning, the most powerful (and embedded in virtually all others) is that of professional conversation. Reflective conversations about practice require teachers to understand and analyze events in the classroom. In these conversations, teachers must consider the instructional decisions they have made and examine student learning in light of those decisions.

There can be no doubt that conversation contributes to thinking. Indeed, the English language includes several expressions that attest to the connection. "I'm thinking out loud" (meaning, "I'm saying something, but I'm not exactly sure what it is yet"), or "How do I know what I think until I hear myself say it?" Being challenged to think and express those ideas in words helps people clarify their thoughts.

But the value of professional conversations extends far beyond the particular settings in which they occur; that is, they have value both in the moment and over time. By participating in thoughtful conversations about practice, teachers acquire valuable habits of mind that enable them to pursue such thinking on their own, without the scaffolding provided by the particular conversation. On another occasion, teachers can consider the

lessons they have extracted from a given situation and determine their applicability to a new set of circumstances. It is this transfer of insight that makes professional conversation such a powerful vehicle for learning.

The role of the other (i.e., the colleague, the supervisor, the coach) in the conversation is critical; they supply the mirror, the sounding board, the sympathetic (and indeed sometimes challenging) voice. The role of the professional colleague is to engage the teacher in deep conversations about practice. This can only be done if it is informed by an overarching view of learning and teaching and skill in the eliciting teacher thinking. In addition, by inquiring about a teacher's purpose, earlier activities around a topic, and future plans for the class, an observer conveys respect for the teacher's experience and expertise and deep empathy for the teacher in the complex decisions that constitute teaching.

But a professional conversation is more than an opportunity to offer support to a teacher engaged in challenging work. It also provides the setting with an agenda and an important opportunity to push at the margins, to promote an examination of underlying principles of learning and teaching. That is, when an observer has spent time, even a short amount of time, in a classroom watching the students' activity and their interactions with one another and with the teacher, the two educators now have something concrete to discuss. They are not talking in theoretical terms only, although their conversation must be grounded in solid theory. The observation enables them to consider whether, for example, a different student grouping, or a slightly modified activity, or a different approach to closure would have yielded greater student engagement or understanding. And when they have actual samples of student work to look at, the richness of these conversations is only enhanced.

This book, then, is intended to assist educators in having powerful conversations about student learning in the context of a shared understanding of the big ideas of learning and motivation that underlie all professional work.

ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

Teaching entails expertise; like other professions, professionalism in teaching requires complex decision making in conditions of uncertainty. Professionalism suggests that there is a body of knowledge about practice, which is embraced by all members of the profession. Therefore, professionals are parts of communities of practice. In spite of the cultures in many schools, professional educators don't work in isolation. Their practice is only partly a consequence of school policies; it is also the result of

the accumulated wisdom of countless researchers and practitioners whose findings constitute, over time, the accepted theories of action.

To engage in meaningful conversations about practice, educators must establish a common understanding about the nature of the work. Conversations rest on a number of essential assumptions regarding the nature of professionalism in teaching, the importance of ongoing teacher learning, and the mechanisms that promote it.

The Demands of Teaching

As any educator can attest, teaching is enormously complex work involving many dimensions. Particularly for those new to the profession, teaching is daunting in its challenges, and many teachers find themselves ill prepared for their first few years. Compared to other professions, teaching has high rates of attrition; while this is partly explained by modest salaries, it also reflects the demands of the work.

There are several distinct dimensions to the challenges of teaching. First, it's important to recognize that teaching is demanding *physical* work. Teachers are on their feet; they are moving around. Many primary-level teachers are up and down off the floor or at least bending down to be at the same level as their students. Some modern high schools are vast physical structures, and going to one's classroom, then to the lunch room, then to a committee meeting or to the office can involve walking a considerable distance. It's no wonder, then, that most teachers are physically exhausted at the end of a day.

Second, teaching is challenging *emotional* work, and the more caring a teacher is the more demanding his or her work will be. Some students' lives are difficult, and their behavior and performance in school reflect those difficulties. Even when they try to stay removed from students' personal lives, some teachers can't help but be drawn in. Furthermore, teachers have an obligation to step up if they encounter evidence of serious deprivation or actual abuse. All this takes a toll on teachers as well; they can find themselves quite exhausted from the emotional demands of their work.

But most important, teaching is demanding *cognitive* work; teachers make hundreds of nonroutine decisions each day. Lee Shulman (2004) has described the intellectual demands of teaching brilliantly:

The practice of teaching involves a far more complex task environment than does that of medicine. The teacher is confronted not with a single patient but with a classroom filled with 25–35 youngsters. The teacher's goals are multiple; the school's obligations far from unitary. Even in the ubiquitous primary reading group, the teacher must simultaneously be concerned with the learning of decoding skills as well as comprehension, with motivation and

love of reading as well as word attack, and must both monitor the performance of the six or eight students in front of her while not losing touch with the other two dozen in the room. Moreover, individual differences among pupils are a fact of life, exacerbated even further by the worthwhile policies of mainstreaming and school integration. The only time a physician could possibly encounter a situation of comparable complexity would be in the emergency room of a hospital during or after a natural disaster. (p. 258)

This cognitive characteristic of teaching has enormous implications, of course, in how teachers engage in conversations about practice. If one acknowledges, as one must, the cognitive nature of teaching, then conversations about teaching must be about *the cognition*. It's not sufficient to describe, or discuss, or even critique what a teacher has done; it's essential also to explore the reasoning that underlies those actions. And as part of exploring the thinking, educators will also be involved, inevitably, in considerations about alternative courses of actions and the likely consequences of each.

Of course, recognizing the cognitive nature of teaching implies supporting the ongoing development of such thinking. This is explained powerfully by Glickman, Gordan, and Ross-Gordan (2003).

The problem with the need for high-stage teachers is that, although the work by its nature demands autonomous and flexible thinking, teachers in most schools are not supported in ways to improve their thinking. The only alternative for a teacher in a complex environment who cannot adjust to multiple demands and is not being helped to acquire the abilities to think abstractly and autonomously is to *simplify and deaden the instructional environment*. Teachers make the environment less complex by disregarding differences among students and by establishing routines and instructional practices that remain the same day after day and year after year. . . . Effective teaching has been misunderstood and misapplied as a set and sequence of certain teaching behaviors (review previous day's objectives, present objectives, explain, demonstrate, guided practice, check for understanding, etc.) This explanation of effectiveness is simply untrue. (p. 72)

The Contextual Nature of Teaching

Teachers don't exercise their professional expertise in isolation, either from their colleagues or their setting. All teaching, in other words, occurs within a context, even if one is referring to the same discipline at the same level, for example, third-grade mathematics. The essential mathematics concepts to be learned may be essentially the same in all third-grade classes,

but students from a rural environment will be able to understand those concepts in light of fencing on a farm, for example, or the need to mix animal feed in a certain manner. Students who live in a city would find other references more meaningful, such as the distance traveled on a city bus or the dimensions of a local playground. Thus, the techniques teachers use and the examples they employ are adapted to the context in which they are working.

The framework for teaching (Danielson, 2007) describes the essential work of teaching, dividing that work into 22 components clustered into four broad domains (planning and preparation, the classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities). Each component (such as establishing an environment of respect and rapport) is described with the description followed by a chart or a rubric, which identifies the critical elements of that component and then provides brief descriptions of a teacher's performance at each of four levels of performance (unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished).

The framework for teaching is itself generic; that is, there is one framework that encompasses all teaching situations, from first-grade literacy to high school physics. This is not to dismiss the range of factors (the age and culture of the students, the subject being addressed, the setting—whether urban or rural) that make each educational encounter unique. But beneath the unique character of each situation are fundamental constructs; in every successful classroom, students feel respected, for example, by both the teacher and other students. The specific actions taken by a high school teacher to create such a culture may be profoundly different from those taken by a first-grade teacher. And yet the result is the same: every student honored and valued.

However, the fact remains that teaching is highly contextualized; conversations about practice concern the events of a single teaching episode with a specific group of students learning some specific content. How an individual addresses those particularities is part of the skill of teaching and may be explored through conversation. A teacher will use slightly different approaches with one group of students than another, even when teaching similar content. In deciding which approach to take, a teacher demonstrates both expertise and sensitivity to each situation. And exploring the teacher's thinking in deciding on each approach is one of the factors that makes such conversations rich and productive.

The Role of Feedback

The place of feedback in learning has been well established, particularly for students. It is pointed out that when students receive feedback that is timely and specific, against clear standards, they are able to bridge the gap between current performance and desired goals more

quickly than when the feedback is general or delayed in time from their work. That is, feedback in the form of “Great effort!” or “You can do better!” does little to guide students in how their work could be improved. To stimulate additional effort and successful performance by students, teachers must be able to show students, specifically, how their efforts fall short and what they must do to bring their work up to meet the standard.

Similarly, feedback must be given in a timely fashion. When a test is returned to students several weeks after the event, many of them will have forgotten the details of what they were learning and will find it difficult to make the necessary effort to correct their errors in understanding or procedures. By then the content is “cold,” and it’s much more difficult to make use of even thoughtful teacher comments than it would have been closer to the event.

The biggest gains in student learning occur when students assess and monitor their own performance against clear performance standards. When they examine, for example, a sample of their—or a peer’s—writing against a rubric and determine that it falls short in some aspect (such as clarity of language), the author is better able to address the difficulty and strengthen the effort.

Much of the same reasoning applies to teachers. When there are clear standards of practice, feedback against those standards enables them to improve their performance. It is this phenomenon that has made the framework for teaching so widely used among educators around the world; teachers are able to receive specific feedback on their practice and to see what they must do to improve. New teachers, in particular, appreciate hearing from an administrator that their performance is on the right track, and they value a supervisor’s praise for using some excellent practices. Such feedback is validating and goes a long way toward motivating educators in their first years of teaching, when many become discouraged by the complexity of the work.

But as teachers gain experience and become more mature in their practice, they become less reliant on pats on the back from administrators. Especially when teachers have attained the security of a tenured position, they are able to become more self-reliant in assessing their own practice and in charting a course toward improvement. They are aware of where their teaching needs strengthening, and they are able to pursue a course of action toward it. Furthermore, when teachers participate in professional learning communities, they work together to solve challenging educational challenges. Thus, experienced teachers don’t rely nearly as much as do novices on the positive strokes they receive from administrators; instead, they work as colleagues to devise better instructional approaches for their students. The administrator’s role, then, particularly with experienced

teachers, in conducting professional conversations is more that of colleague than that of external judge.

This way of looking at professional conversations has implications for the way administrators offer feedback to teachers. Supervisors have been trained, in their preparation programs, that a critical function of supervision is the observation of teaching and the providing of feedback. And as already noted, teachers early in their career appreciate such feedback from administrators because it affirms their efforts. But for more experienced teachers, feedback can actually seem patronizing and condescending; they are experienced professionals; what they seek from their administrators is the counsel of an even more experienced colleague, not a pat on the back from an individual who may not be as familiar with the details of an instructional situation.

Thus, feedback plays a smaller role in professional conversations than it does in more traditional forms of supervision and professional development. When educators recognize that for teachers to advance in their understanding, they must be the ones to engage in the work of self-assessment and reflection on practice, and then external feedback is seen as a possible hindrance to that process.

SUMMARY

Professional conversation is an essential technique to promote professional learning among teachers. These conversations may be undertaken by teachers and administrators, teachers and formal teacher leaders (such as instructional coaches), or among teachers as colleagues. In all cases, they are conducted in such a way to respect the professional judgment of teachers and as a vehicle to explore ways to enhance student learning.

Professional conversations about teaching are embedded in the complex nature of teaching and reflect important assumptions about teaching: the nature of professionalism, the demands of professional learning, and the appropriate role of feedback. In addition, such conversations provide an opportunity to explore the nature of student learning in specific situations.

Furthermore, conversations about practice are grounded in important big ideas about student learning and take place within the organizational context of schools. In particular, administrators hold greater raw power than do teachers, and this fact colors all professional conversations. These issues are explored in the chapters that follow.