JANE E. POLLOCK Sharon M. Ford

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Improving Student Learning **Principal** at a Time

Improving Student Learning **One Principal at a Time**



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To our friend, Ilene Block.

To my sisters and brothers who played school with me in Venezuela: Beth, Jimmy, and Johnny; Sandy, the associate head of school; and Bobby, the principal.

–JEP

With appreciation to my husband, Gary, for his ongoing encouragement; my sister, Carol, for her wise words; my mother, Doris, for her loving support; my father, Don, for encouraging my work in education; and my cousin, Charles W. De Pue, former superintendent of schools.

-SMF

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Introduction

Horace knows that the status quo is the problem. Only by examining the existing compromises . . . and moving beyond them to better compromises, can one form a more thoughtful school. And only in thoughtful schools can thoughtful students be hatched.

Theodore R. Sizer, Horace's School

LAYNE PARMENTER, PRINCIPAL OF URIE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN LYMAN, WYOMING, sent Jane E. Pollock, one of this book's authors, an e-mail that read as follows:

Thanks for working with our teachers last week on lesson planning and research-based instructional strategies. They liked the lesson planning schema—the way of organizing instruction by deliberately targeting how to strengthen feedback to students in order to markedly improve their performances on district curriculum standards.

Say, I was thinking that maybe you have some ideas about conferencing with teachers before and after I observe their classes. I use the district evaluation forms and procedures, of course, but speaking honestly, these forms and procedures don't really help me, as a school supervisor, discuss how a teacher should teach better so that students will learn better. I've been so busy with all of my other administrative "duties as assigned" that I have not developed a good way to communicate instructional suggestions specifically about *learning* and not just about the teaching.

A few days later, Jane received another e-mail, this time from Mike, a high school teacher:

Picture this: I'm a little nervous about going to my post-observation conference. I have the recognizable structure to my lesson. I also have a great, positive tone in my classroom, and students are engaged in the learning. But there's something horribly wrong:. I look through my grade book and see about seven students in each class failing, with *Ds* and *Fs*. That's about 30 students in the four 9th grade English classes I teach . . . more than a quarter of my students. What is my appraising administrator going to say about those data?

Much to my surprise, nothing. During my post-observation conference, there is no mention of the failures in my classes. I get glowing remarks about my lesson, the positive-feeling tone, and the fact that all students appeared to be engaged. I should be happy about this, but I leave the conference with mixed emotions because I *know* something's wrong with my teaching. How could I get such a glowing appraisal when more than 25 percent of my students are doing so poorly? Maybe I don't understand—are evaluation and supervision supposed to be the same process?

Reflecting on my teaching, I planned lessons using the district curriculum guide and approved textbook, and I designed great activities organized to fit the time frame (even with good transitions), but I wasn't conscientiously assessing what students knew. I had the superficial pieces of teaching in place, but I was missing that significant element of feedback that you say would help my students perform better.

Who is supposed to help me improve student learning if my supervisor doesn't address this during an appraisal?

After receiving these e-mails, Jane contacted Sharon M. Ford, who had recently retired as assistant professor at the University of Colorado at Denver, where she taught graduate supervision courses in the Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies program. Both Layne (the principal) and Mike (the teacher) recognized that classroom observations had merit for teacher-evaluation purposes, but both sensed the need for a different approach to observations for supervision purposes: a way to help a principal and a teacher collaborate to improve student performance. Accordingly, Jane asked Sharon if she had any research on evaluating and supervising teaching to improve student learning that would be pertinent to both a principal and a teacher.

As we, Sharon and Jane, perused the literature together, we discussed the ways in which various models of evaluation and supervision fostered more effective schooling and concluded that the ones that were most supportive of this goal repeatedly targeted teacher actions, professional development, and improvements in the collegial relationship between administrator and teacher. However, we noted that although improving student achievement is a frequently stated goal of supervision, there are actually very few supervision strategies explicitly aimed at this target. Yes, the supervisory role focuses on improving both teaching and learning, but many actual methods of supervision focus heavily on *teacher* behaviors and attitudes, assuming that *learner* gains will happen as a result of teachers reflecting upon and possibly changing their practices. As Mike's e-mail indicates, this does not necessarily follow.

Our investigation continued. We revisited the history of supervision, looking at the evolution of its role and purpose in education. We explored various approaches that supervisors have used to evaluate or coach teachers. We also interviewed school administrators and heard principals and teachers sounding a recurring theme: both considered supervision and evaluation tasks an add-on to their jobs—and one that seldom led to tangible improvements.

Have the demands on principals and teachers changed so much over time that supervision is no longer an effective means of improving teaching to improve learning? Do most teachers really approach their classroom observation as a "dog and pony show" aimed at pacifying supervisors? Do they expect the feedback they get from this observation to be inadequate and inconsequential? Has supervision become unfeasible for principals who, by their own admission, follow evaluation protocol to judge teaching and professionalism but are uncertain about how to give teachers useful and effective feedback that will help students learn better?

We examined more than 100 years of nationwide population changes, both for students and for the teaching force; business management practices adopted by schools; the impact of events such as wars and the Sputnik satellite program; the introduction of collective bargaining; and the increasing diversity of students. These factors all contributed to the ways supervision shifted from inspection models, to leadership frameworks, to clinical supervision models, to models advocating for social justice, to today's standards movement fueled by accountability fever. Our conversations were alternatively complicated, when considering past events and factors that influenced supervision, and lucid, when reflecting on the patterns that surfaced in supervision trends in education.

The Focus and Purpose of Supervision

Throughout the history of education, supervision's focus has always been the teacher, and its stated goal has been the improvement of instructional practices. The complication is that supervision originally served two purposes: eliminating ineffective teachers who were deficient in skills and strengthening the overall school organization. For this reason, administrators have had to simultaneously perform roles of evaluator and supervisor and balance the seemingly contradictory goals of "evaluating" and "improving." This has often placed administrators and teachers in a "we/they" position, diminishing their opportunities to work together for improvement of learning.

As Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993) point out, supervision has become increasingly cooperative and focused on the clear goal of instructional improvement. The way that the process has gradually expanded to include the teacher in the discussion about what the supervisor observes is evidence of this evolution. However, only recently have the teacher's students—their progress and achievement—become a focus for supervisors. But looking at student work and progress as a factor of a teacher's instructional effectiveness is still not a widespread supervision practice; when it is done, the data considered are almost exclusively summative achievement data, and the primary question considered is whether overall student achievement improves from one year to the next, rather than what ongoing effects individual teachers have on individual student performance as the school year progresses.

Changing Supervision

When comparing the traditional, managerial evaluation practices that sought to remove weak employees with more recent forms of supportive supervision that cultivate a relationship between supervisor and teacher, it is clear that the goals of supervision have not specified formative tasks to explicitly improve student learning. Current research on learning, however, suggests that we can successfully develop a new approach to supervising teachers that results in improved learning for all students.

We know that the quality of a teacher's planning, delivery, and assessment significantly affects student learning (Tucker & Stronge, 2005) and that student success increases when teachers use certain instructional strategies (see Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Teachers can deliberately change their practices to achieve gains for their students, as evidenced by external test scores, and they can also boost all learners' knowledge retention and application rates, as evidenced by classroom data and reports. A supervisory tool, used by teachers and principals in collaboration, can provide the technical assistance teachers need to make those sound instructional decisions. Such a tool can also strengthen the principal's ability to examine student results with a teacher, who can, in turn, take immediate action aimed at improving instruction and learning for that cohort of students. A good supervisory tool generates timely feedback on student performance—and thus, teacher performance—that teachers can act on immediately. Contrast this with the months of time that pass before student results in the form of external measures or state tests can be brought to a staff's attention.

In this book, we turn our attention to the powerful role that every principal can play in improving supervisor–teacher communication, instructional efficiency, and, ultimately, student learning. What we present here is an extension of the research and ideas explored in Jane's book *Improving Student Learning One Teacher at a Time* (Pollock, 2007), in which she wrote that an individual teacher furthers student advancement by adhering to the fundamentals she calls the "Big Four":

1. Use a well-articulated curriculum. Institute clearly articulated, "just-right" grade-level curriculum standards (benchmarks).

2. *Plan for delivery*. Plan and deliver instruction using the Teaching Schema for Master Learners with research-based instructional strategies.

3. *Vary assessment*. Assessment methods should cover a wide range of formal and informal methods and should include frequent formative as well as summative assessment.

4. *Give criterion-based feedback.* Revitalize feedback methods, including scoring to grade-level curriculum standards (benchmarks) in grade books and generating reports that more accurately inform students, parents or guardians, and team members about student progress.

Teachers who apply the recommended techniques for each of these four areas generate better student performances and improve their communication with students and their parents and guardians. Although these areas seem like obvious targets for schools undergoing reform, most school-improvement initiatives focus on only one at a time; it is employing all of the Big Four in tandem that is critical for making gains.

In her book, Jane also encouraged teachers to use the Teaching Schema for Master Learners (see Step 2 in the Big Four) to plan their daily teaching, because the Schema provides a way to introduce all elements of the Big Four—a just-right curriculum; well-structured, research-based instruction; varied assessment; and targeted feedback—into every lesson.

The steps in the Schema (and step abbreviations that form the acronym "GANAG") are as follows*:

- 1. Set the learning goal— curriculum standard and benchmarks (G) *Opportunity for feedback*
- 2. Access prior student knowledge (A) *Opportunity for feedback*
- 3. Acquire new information—declarative or procedural (N) *Opportunity for feedback*
- 4. Apply thinking skills or use knowledge in new situations (A) *Opportunity for feedback*
- 5. Generalize or summarize learning back to learning goal (G) *Opportunity for feedback*
- 6. Assign homework, if necessary

^{*}The discussion of the Teaching Schema for Master Learners in Jane's book *Improving Student Learning One Teacher* at a Time (2007) featured a different abbreviation scheme: GO for set the learning goal/benchmarks, APK for access prior knowledge, NI for acquire new information, APP for apply thinking skills or real-world situation, and GEN for generalize/summarize. The current shorthand, abbreviating to GANAG, reflects the way practitioners have come to talk about the Schema.

The Schema acts as a scaffold for connecting the curriculum directly to instruction and assessment by illuminating the importance of giving feedback to help ensure student progress on the grade-level curriculum standards. Every lesson is, in a sense, a microcosm of the Big Four.

In this book, we present an adaptation of the Teaching Schema for Master Learners (and, by extension, the Big Four) for principals and others who perform supervisory duties within a school. The consensus that supervisors' classroom observations can invigorate teaching and learning confirms our decision to focus improvement efforts on the procedures supervisors use during the observation and the post-observation conference. We believe the center of attention for the supervisor–teacher discussion must be what the learner is learning as a result of the teacher's instruction and ongoing feedback. This shared goal guides professional dialogue prior to the classroom observation, serves as an advance organizer for the supervisor as he or she transcribes the events of a lesson, and guides analysis after the classroom observation.

The first chapter in this book provides a historical overview of the adjustments that have been made to supervision over the years and how those adjustments affected teaching and learning. Each subsequent chapter discusses specific techniques that principals and other supervisors can apply to the beginning, middle, and end of a classroom observation. Finally, we discuss the critical role a principal can play using the data gleaned from teachers' grade books, from grades on report cards, and from common local assessments and state or national test results.

Between the chapters, we hear from supervisors who report on the reality of the work we propose. These administrators describe their experiences adapting the steps of the Teaching Schema for Master Learners to their existing practices and how, in doing so, they have helped to improve student learning—one principal at a time.