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Supervision and Teacher Wellness: An Essential Component for Improving Classroom Practice

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Supervision and Teacher Wellness: An Essential Component for Improving Classroom Practice

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Abstract

Teaching has always been a stressful profession, but the additions of high-stakes accountability coupled with a global pandemic have increased stress to unprecedented levels. Thus, supervision must attend to teacher wellness to improve instructional practice. This article offers practical suggestions educational leaders can implement in their supervision to support teachers' emotional well-being. Those strategies include being humble, giving statements of affirmation and practice, using data to drive inquiry, focusing on strengths, offering concrete suggestions, thinking aloud, re-energizing teachers intellectually, leveraging community resources, and developing teacher leaders. More information about these strategies and other practical ways to support teacher learning can be found in the book *Leadership for Learning: How to Bring Out the Best in Teachers* (2nd ed.).

Keywords

supervision; social emotional learning; instructional leadership; educational leadership; teacher education

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Introduction

Recently we have realized that despite the attention that has been given to developmental levels, technical skills, interpersonal approaches, and comprehensive methods to support instructional improvement, attending to teacher wellness is an essential component to supervision and instructional leadership (Glickman & Burns, 2020). The 2019 issue of *Educational Leadership* was entirely dedicated to teacher stress, and the annual poll of teacher attitudes toward K-12 education (Gewertz, 2019) found the majority of teachers feel they are being worked on, not worked with, and a 2017 American Federation of Teachers study found 61 percent of teachers feel their jobs were always or often stressful, and 58 percent cited poor mental health as a result of job-related stress (AFT, 2017). All this, keep in mind, was from studies prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Now in May of 2021, an even larger share of teachers (92 percent) report teaching is increasingly stressful (Kurtz, 2021). Issues of teacher burn out, retention, emotional and intellectual health, and professional development and satisfaction need to be front and center in the work that we do in the context of supervision and instructional leadership.

Recommendations of Practitioners

Educational leadership is required at all levels, from the classroom teachers to the principal to the superintendent. The ongoing drive of enacting leadership in action is the same: to invigorate a school's collective reach to reimagine new classroom learning opportunities for teachers and students. What follows is what we believe is necessary for you, the reader, to consider in helping others improve their classroom practice. We offer seven recommendations for bringing out the best in teachers, especially now in a stressful high stakes accountability climate exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; they include: 1) be humble; 2) give statements of affirmation and praise; 3) use data, protocols, and teacher inquiry; 4) offer concrete suggestions and think aloud; 5) reenergize teachers intellectually; 6) leverage resources and community schools; and 7) develop teachers as leaders³.

Be Humble

When observing a teacher, there is a natural tendency to compare what is observed to one's own preferred style. Thoughts might cross your mind such as "Why is the teacher doing that? That's not right. The teacher should do it like this." This narcissistic tendency to want to make others like us is dangerous because different does not necessarily mean bad (Pajak, 2012). Thus, when you observe classroom practices that may look different from how you would have done it, pause and focus on the myriad of practices that can achieve common learning goals. The larger, school-based question should be, "What is the overall definition of teaching and learning in our school? What do we want students to be able to know and do and how do we assess achievement progress? It's not your definition, it is a common definition that belongs to all and teachers can implement practices that respond to those larger questions in multiple ways. This mindset leads to encouraging a teacher to reflect on what you have observed and opens space for innovative thinking, experimenting, and mutual problem solving.

³ This article is based on content drawn from *Leadership for learning: How to bring out the best in every teacher* (2nd ed.). To learn more, visit bit.ly/LeadLrn2EBk.

Being humble is not easy. Being humble sometimes means allowing teachers to take risks and try strategies with which you already have experience and feel would not work in a given situation. When that happens, ask the teacher questions to understand their thinking more deeply. Sentence starters like, “Tell me more about that strategy” and “Why do you think that strategy will work in this given situation?” or “What is it about that strategy that is appealing to you?” and “How do you think that strategy will benefit your students?” Getting answers to those questions will give you insight into the teacher’s thinking, and if the teacher has a strong rationale connected to supporting their students’ learning, then why not allow them to take the risk? Remember, so long as students’ well-being is prioritized and the teacher’s idea is aligned with the definition of teaching and learning for the school than the teacher should be able to pursue this approach.

Give Statements of Affirmation and Praise

Teachers, like all of us, need to hear that they are doing a good job and that others have confidence in them. They especially need to hear those words of support from their peers and leaders. Support can come in many forms. Praise is a common form of support. Letting a teacher know that you have noticed something they have done well can really boost a teacher’s spirit. Statements such as “I noticed when you did X, the students really responded with Y” or “I really appreciated when you did X” and then tell the teacher how their actions have helped others like their students, the school, their peers, or even you. You can give praise verbally or you can leave the teacher a note in their mailbox, on their desk, or through their email. No matter how you give praise, try to notice at least one positive action from a teacher every day.

Praise is not the only way to offer teachers support. You can also give emotional support through summarizing and reflective statements. Really listening to teachers and offering statements of support like “I have confidence in you...” “So, what I hear you saying is...” “It sounds like...” are all helpful sentence starters that show teachers you hear them. You could also offer assistance by asking questions like, “How can I help?,” “What do you need from me right now?” or “What else can I do for you at this time?” These can all be useful questions to let teachers know that you empathize and that you are there for them. Teachers who are severely stressed just want to know that somebody, and especially those whom they look up to, recognizes what they are going through. Emotional support comes from the heart; they are affirmations that are true and genuine.

Use Data, Success Analysis Protocols, and Teacher Inquiry

In addition to statements of affirmation, using data and deliberately pointing to successes in the data if the teacher is struggling can be helpful. If a teacher is feeling down or shares a problem or dilemma with you, try to find the bright side of the problem and direct the teacher toward the positive potentials within the problem.

We have found that using a modified version of the Success Analysis Protocol from the School Reform Initiative can be really helpful (Grove, 2017). The Success Analysis Protocol asks teachers to think about a time when they were successful and to record that success on a piece of paper. They also should note why it was so successful. The teacher then shares their success with you and/or with a group of peers. During the conversation, others can ask the teacher clarifying

and probing questions to learn more about the success. This time of questioning can be very powerful for the teacher as it helps to unearth tacit practices and ways of being; it can show the teacher what they have accomplished and how they have been successful in the past. Focusing on strengths and celebrating successes are critical for providing teachers with emotional support. While it is helpful to hear it from you as their leader, when teachers come to the realization of their own successes themselves, the experience can be equally powerful and transformative.

In addition to the Success Analysis Protocol, you can also use teacher inquiry as an emotional support strategy. By turning the teacher's problem or dilemma into a question, the teacher regains control and becomes the driver to address the issue. Some leaders find using humor as an effective strategy, but we caution this strategy. If your humor is typically sarcasm, it can create misunderstanding and actually perpetuate the problem (Burns et al., 2020), so be judicious in how you use humor.

Offer Concrete Suggestions and Support Thinking Out Loud

Sometimes when teachers are down emotionally, they do not have much tolerance for ambiguity. If they come to you, they may be seeking practical suggestions as potential solutions. While we do not advocate telling teachers what they should do in all situations, there are times when giving teachers suggestions is necessary. An educator, when incredibly frustrated with their practice, might want your advice. Statements that begin with "In my experience, I have found..." "Have you tried..." or "If I were in your shoes, I might..." can be useful. Even highly functioning teachers sometimes need a trusted person to turn to in order to help them think straight.

A word of caution – telling teachers what to do is much easier and requires less skill than asking questions to deeply understand a problem, elicit their beliefs, and empower them to identify potential solutions. If you misdiagnose a teacher's emotional needs and you give them concrete suggestions when it was not warranted or wanted, a teacher might find you overbearing or imposing. A good rule of thumb is to offer suggestions only when a teacher asks for it. If a teacher hasn't explicitly said, "What would you do?" you could open the door by asking, "May I make a suggestion?" or "Would you like my advice?" and then if the teacher agrees you can use one of the other sentence starters like, "In my experience..." etc. Otherwise, it's best not to offer concrete suggestions until the teacher is ready and has specifically asked for that kind of support.

In addition to giving advice, you can think aloud with teachers. By thinking aloud, you are modeling an open, problem solving process. You also are showing empathy with the situation by illustrating how you would feel and respond if you were experiencing the same dilemma. Sometimes teachers need to see images of the possible. Suggesting that a teacher observe another teacher can help the frustrated teacher see an image of possibility, of what it could look like in practice, which can encourage the frustrated teacher to take risks in the future. You could support this suggestion by covering the teacher's class while they observe another teacher or by arranging for a guest teacher to cover the class while you observe someone else with the teacher. Finally, you also can draw on their past experiences. Asking the teacher questions like, "Have you experienced something like this in the past?" or "What have you done in the past when you have encountered..." can be helpful in reminding the teacher of past successful experiences.

Reenergize Teachers Intellectually

Sometimes teachers' frustration is connected to their struggles with improvement. This is especially true with innovative teachers and those we have identified as consummate professionals. Teachers who are higher functioning thrive on innovation and change, which can become stifled under high-stakes accountability policies. Sometimes higher functioning teachers want to be intellectually challenged – they want to grow and continually improve. In these cases, you can support a teacher's emotional well-being by stretching the teacher's thinking to unearth tacit beliefs and rethink practice. Sometimes teachers might become frustrated because they feel like they are stagnating professionally. Teaching is not exciting to them anymore. Stretching their thinking can be an effective strategy for reenergizing professional teachers.

The best way is to engage in spirited dialogue by asking questions and challenging ideas. Seeking to understand why a teacher is doing what they are doing or have always done takes time, yet it can be a powerful, productive dialogue for improving practice. Sentence starters like, "Tell me about..." "Why do you think that is..." "How is/are..." "What would excite you to try as a teacher..." can invite such thinking.

Reenergizing teachers can also come from outside experiences. If your budget allows, find ways for the teacher to attend a conference or workshop. Suggest a provocative article (or even our book, perhaps) to stimulate thinking. Encourage them to network online with other educators involved in stimulating and innovative practices or join a "best practices" study group.

Leverage Resources and Community Schools

Community schools are a trending model of educational reform across the United States. There are a variety of models, but the commonality among all of them is leveraging resources from the community to support a holistic approach to education by providing access and opportunity to extracurricular activities, health and well-being services, and high-quality academic instruction. In Florida, for example, Community Partnership Schools are an emerging model of school-university community collaboration spearheaded by the University of Central Florida. In this model, a local education agency, an institution of higher education, a local medical provider, and a local community non-profit make a long-term (twenty-five years to be exact) commitment to transforming the local community by making the school the hub of the community.

Through community schools, parents, children, and other community members can get access to medical services, dental services, vision services, mental health services, employment training, and more at the school. Students get access to a variety of extracurricular after school activities like music, art, dance, robotics, sports, tutoring, and more that are not provided during the regular academic day. By learning about the local community agencies and partnering with them, you can leverage external resources to support students so that they come to school with their basic needs met. This way, students can focus on learning, and your teachers can focus on teaching. High-quality partnerships can improve teaching and create a true continuum of lifelong learning for teachers (Burns et al., 2015).

Develop Teacher Leaders

Teacher leadership is defined as the ability of teachers to positively influence the instructional practice of their peers (Hunzicker, 2018; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Developing teachers as teacher leaders not only can assist you with improving school culture and climate as well as instructional practice, but it can also address teachers' social emotional well-being by re-invigorating your most professional teachers.

So how do you cultivate teacher leadership in your building? Some leaders create schoolwide committees where teachers have the opportunity to spearhead different initiatives. In schools with whom we have worked, we have seen committees like "The Sunshine Committee" targeting teacher morale and school-wide culture, "The Professional Development Committee" targeting teacher voice in professional learning in the school, and "The Advisory Committee" targeting instructional and non-instructional staff input into the functioning of the school. Other schools have opportunities like team leader, grade level leader, or department chair.

Leading through formal committees or roles is one way, but teacher leadership can also be enacted in informal ways. These organic teacher leaders want to improve professionally, but they love teaching and don't want to leave their students or their classrooms. Helping these informal teacher leaders means finding ways to help fulfill their professional desires while allowing them space to lead from within their classrooms. One way we have seen leaders cultivate informal teacher leadership is by having demonstration classrooms. Other leaders have encouraged teachers to mentor teacher candidates as a way to give back to the profession and lead from within the classroom. The point is leading must become a collaborative endeavor. School-wide change does come from a strong leader, but a strong leader recognizes that they can't do it alone. They need to build internal capacity to harness the intellectual expertise and the cultural capital of teachers within their buildings to develop a shared sense of responsibility and collective efficacy to actualize change. By seeing the leadership potential in your teachers and intentionally developing that leadership, you can create a powerful school leadership team to become an unstoppable force for instructional improvement (see Burns et al., 2017; Burns et al., 2020).

Implications for Supervision

The work of instructional improvement is not a glory train; people will disagree with each other, they will get tired, and unpredictable negatives will occur. But when all is said and done, when educators work purposefully within and across classrooms, students, in all their magnificent differences, will learn well and all of us as educators and leaders will stand proud to have ushered in a new and better future for our youth. In this age of high-stakes accountability, it can be tempting to solely focus on instructional practice, but attending to teacher wellness as an integral practice in your supervision is imperative to improving instructional practice; it is not separate from it. By being humble, giving statements of affirmation and practice, using data to drive inquiry, focusing on strengths, offering concrete suggestions, thinking aloud, re-energizing teachers intellectually, leveraging community resources, and developing teachers leaders, educational leaders can enhance their supervision to improve teachers' instructional practice in order to positively influence student learning.

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Author Biographies

Carl Glickman is professor emeritus of education at the University of Georgia. His recent books are *Leadership for Learning: How to Bring Out the Best in Every Teacher*, co-authored with Rebecca West Burns, and *The Essential Renewal of America’s Schools; A Leadership Guide for Democratizing Schools from the Inside Out*, co-authored with Ian M. Mette. His supervision book with Stephen Gordon and Jovita Ross-Gordon, now in its 10th edition, was selected as the best educational administration textbook of all time by Book Authority.

Rebecca West Burns is the Bill Herrold Endowed Professor and Director of Clinical Practice and Educational Partnerships for the College of Education and Human Services at the University of North Florida. She is known for her research and practical applications of verbal and nonverbal supervisory behaviors that promote individual teacher growth. She recently published *Clinically Based Teacher Education in Action: Cases from Professional Development Schools* and *(Re)Designing Programs: A Vision for Equity-Centered, Clinically Based Teacher Preparation*.