

Prioritising Principals' Roles

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With increasing demands on school administrators to become plant and facility managers and implementers of new policies, their essential functions are slowly being eroded to the disadvantage of instructional development and, ultimately, optimum student learning. This is by no means peculiar to our local educational context, but is also an area of concern internationally.

A commonly used model of teacher supervision is evaluation and reporting through the observation of teaching, along with the possible inclusion of other teacher involvement. A system of supervision by heads of departments (HODs) and vice-principals (VPs) is the current policy that supposedly directs practice in this domain. However, a major area of weakness in this practice is that time constraints make follow-up and recommendations difficult to realise, thus rendering the system inefficient.

Regardless of who in the hierarchy does the supervision of teaching, it is important that the model being used actually helps the practising teacher to improve and to perform in ways that recognise the overall mission and vision of the institution. Two developmental approaches to supervision that provide teachers with alternatives for exploring instructional alternatives, as opposed to a rigid teaching plan, are *peer coaching* and *professional growth plans*.

Cynthia Kramer has described *peer coaching* as “the pairing of teachers to observe each others’ lessons, collaboratively reflect upon instruction, and offer feedback regarding instruction”. A *professional growth plan* requires that teachers write goals for their own professional growth and the steps that are required to reach them. In a study she conducted with colleagues in 2009 it was found that there was a strong relationship between the developmental model of teacher supervision and teacher improvement, and that supervisor intervention did help teachers to act effectively upon their stated growth plan.

Related theory also suggests that instructional improvement is more likely to occur when supervision is comprehensive, when the relationship between supervisor and teacher is based on trust, and when the purpose of supervision is clear. Very often in some systems, though, supervision is done as a necessary evil or as an opportunity to clarify a power structure, instead of as a collaborative effort to achieve the intended goal—enhanced student learning.

Locally, HODs and VPs have the responsibility for teacher supervision. They must therefore have knowledge of curriculum, instruction, supervisory practices, and, most importantly, strong interpersonal skills. It is recommended that supervision go beyond the post-observation conversation to include appropriate support, guidance, and follow-through as valuable components of the supervision process. My experience indicates that there is much more that can be done at the departmental level, both inter- and intra-. Often there are pertinent areas common to more than one teacher in a department, and

even common to more than one department. A suggestion is that VPs peruse HODs' notes and look for common areas for support. The tendency to invite outsiders to provide guidance should be minimised. It can be helpful for teachers to see in their administrators the capacity to provide instructional support and guidance. Surely it is advisable for school administrators to delegate plant supervision and logistical matters instead of making them a greater priority than instructional development.

One aspect of follow-up in teacher supervision that cannot be ignored is the teacher's own responsibility to work towards post-discussion goals. Whether they include technical skills, developing resources, or developing personal skills, one essential feature of the growth sought after is the teacher's own self-reflection. Perhaps this is one area that administrators can begin with in their professional staff development goals: the reflection processes. Unless these behaviours become habitual, and systematically supported, they will always be perceived to be an intrusion on teachers' space and time.

Principals need to work closely with VPs and HODs to arrive at common understandings of the processes necessary in teachers' growth paths. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that the old adage still pertains: that one must lead by example. It can help a fledgling teacher, who has embarked on a "learn through observation" strategic plan, to find models that are worthy of emulation in the school leadership. In decision making, problem solving, human relations, and professional and personal image, school principals have a great responsibility to set the stage for another generation of leaders in education.

As we recognise the wide range of responsibilities with which school administrators are faced, we also acknowledge the role of ongoing professional development. I contend that, as a professional community of learners, school faculty can more often than not identify their own needs and make suggestions for administrative and teacher professional development.

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