Combined Instructional Supervision and Staff Development

By John N. Colantonio

Staff development has been inextricably linked to the successful implementation of curricular and instructional innovations and an overall improvement in the quality of the educational environment (Drake & Roe, 2003; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). However, one of the common complaints voiced by teachers regarding inservice programs is the one-shot nature of such efforts. In many instances, schools will hire an “expert” who will come to present a new, one-size-fits-all teaching strategy. Unfortunately, when the expert departs, teachers are left in the unenviable position of having just enough information to be interested in pursuing the strategy but without any structure for ongoing support so they can implement, practice, and adapt the strategy to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

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Two Responsibilities, One Answer
Principals, especially those in small districts that do not have the services of a district curriculum and instruction person, are responsible for leading staff development efforts in their schools. They are also responsible for providing instructional supervision, especially those principals in smaller districts that do not have department chairs or supervisors who are certified and qualified to conduct classroom observations. In many cases, these competing demands mean that instructional supervision is reduced to a summative process of making a cursory classroom visit to complete a checklist that satisfies central office and contractual obligations.

One way to fulfill these two responsibilities and create an educationally effective, growth-oriented environment is to integrate staff development with instructional supervision requirements. A number of components must be in place to create this type of environment.

Knowledge. The first component is the principal’s current knowledge of pedagogy, both general and content specific, and current knowledge concerning learners and learning. Knowledge alone, however, is unlikely to be put to good use unless the principal has functional knowledge and expertise in the area of organization development, including knowing what motivates people and the foundation for implementing change within individuals and the organization itself. Herzberg’s two-factor theory of motivation (as cited in Hersey & Blanchard, 1982), Lewin’s force field analysis (as cited in Cummings & Worley, 2001), Hersey and Blanchard’s (1982) model of situational leadership, Deming’s (1994) model of total quality management, and Senge’s (1990) concept of the learning organization represent just a few of the topics and concepts in this area.

Trust. To integrate staff development with instructional supervision, the ability to create an environment that fosters trust is necessary. Teachers must believe that the principal comes to their classrooms with the primary goal of improving instruction, not grading their performance. Teachers must believe that the goal of the instructional supervision process is to foster formative growth within a collegial environment (Drake & Roe, 2003). The principal becomes a coach who facilitates the growth of teachers’ knowledge and skills in a constructivist manner. Principals must shed the misconception that they are solely responsible for the professional growth of their staff members and have their staff members become active partners in the process.

A principal can begin to nurture this type of environment by modeling the skill that he or she wants teachers to demonstrate. For example, if the principal’s goal is to have teachers take a risk by sharing strengths and needs with him or her, the principal must model that type of risk-taking as well. Principals can find out what teachers expect of them and how they define effective leadership by asking teachers in a semistructured atmosphere what they expect of administrators in the management and the instructional arenas. Once a list of mutually agreeable items has been established, the principal should pledge to work toward those goals, ask for and receive feedback regarding perceived progress, and discuss the successes and problems in public. Again, modeling is the key (McConnell & Colantonio, 1992).

Learning organizations. Individuals within the school must embrace the concept of schools as learning organizations. This systemic component is based on the theory that society and the organizations and institutions within it are rarely in a “stable state” (Schon, 1971) and are in a continuous state of transformation and that traditional approaches to manage this transformation, such as teacher evaluation and staff development, are no longer adequate to deal with the need for continuous growth and learning within the organization. By linking staff development and instructional supervision, the principal can create an environment of learning for all by giving teachers a voice in the process of professional
Sample Questions for the Pre-Observation Conference Form
(to be completed by the teacher prior to the pre-observation conference)

Learning targets. What knowledge, skills, insights, and so forth will students demonstrate at the end of the period? At what level will students demonstrate this learning? What will they be able to do at the end of the period that they were not able to do at the beginning of the period? What state standards are addressed by this lesson?

Process. What will be the mode of instruction? Will you use direct instruction, lecture and dialogue, individual or group activity, lab, film project, research, or another form of constructivist instructional delivery?

Assessment. How will you determine the entry level for this lesson? What will we see the students doing before, during, and after instruction that will demonstrate that they have met the stated objectives? What evidence will we need to see that will allow us to infer mastery of the targets? How will we know when students have “arrived?”

Individual needs. What areas would you like to focus for the current school year regarding your professional growth?

Administrative needs. In what way can the principal support your efforts? What information would facilitate your professional growth in the areas you would like to focus?

Self-analysis questions

How often do I lecture? When do I lecture? How do I plan to include students in the learning process when I lecture?

What level of thinking is required by the questions that I ask?

Have I provided for ample and equitable response opportunities?

Does my lesson have an introduction, a development section, and proper closure?

What is student time-on-task? Engaged time?

Do the students know the objective for the day? The week? The year? Are these objectives aligned with the school curriculum and state standards?

Is there a one-to-one congruence between the enduring concepts of the course, the material presented, and the assessment?

Have I identified potential connections between this material and life outside of school?

growth, not only as recipients of wisdom from on high but also as active participants who operate within a collegial environment.

These key components can be synthesized into a philosophy that guides the principal’s actions. Using this philosophical approach, principals, like teachers, must act intentionally. They must know why they do what they do and be able to clearly articulate that message. An environment of openness, trust, and reflective practice is the prerequisite for staff development by means of instructional supervision.

Common vocabulary. After an environment of openness, trust, and reflective practice has been established, the principal and the staff must generate a common vocabulary based on the instructional needs of the teaching staff. This can be accomplished through a comprehensive staff development program. The vocabulary should include a common vision of the goals of the school and the individual needs of each teacher within that larger context. Schoolwide inservice programs must address the topics and issues that are close to the heart of the teachers. Asking teachers for input will help them feel a sense of ownership of the professional development program. A planning committee that has both a sense of history of the organization and a sense of the future can facilitate decision making in this area. Information gathered from teachers should be integrated with organizational needs such as special education updates, state standards, and No Child Left Behind.

Inservice days, however, can rarely be used to fully implement a new idea or strategy. There is rarely a one-size-fits-all solution to the diverse needs of a given faculty (Glickman, 2002; Glickman, Gordon, & Gordon-Ross, 2001). At best, the inservice day can be used to plant the seeds of a new idea, establish goals, and begin to create a common vocabulary that can be used at later staff development programs and during the collegial dialogue that occurs during the instructional supervision process.

Supervision. A clinical supervisory format—including a pre-observation conference, an observation, a postobservation conference—can be combined with a cognitive coaching model (Costa & Garmston, 1985). In this synthesized model, the teacher becomes an active participant in setting goals, gathering information regarding his or her teaching, and interpreting and applying the results. Using data provided by their supervisor, teachers reflect on their teaching by comparing and contrasting the teacher they want to be with the teacher they are—in essence, conducting a discrepancy analysis of their classroom behaviors.

In the pre-observation conference, the principal focuses on objectives, instructional strategies, assessment, and areas of concern and interest identified by the teacher. The basis of the discussion may include selected components of the concepts and strategies of the overall staff development efforts that align with the concerns of the teacher and the
principal. In some instances, the pre-observation conference may be structured upon the previous postobservation conference.

During the observation, the principal scripts the class, writing down items that address what was discussed during the pre-observation conference as well as any issues that are germane to the desired outcomes of the class. The class may be videotaped to give the teacher an opportunity to observe his or her own classroom (Greene, 1973). However, this option may be effective with some teachers and not others, depending upon their level of maturity as a teacher.

After the class, the principal analyzes the script for themes or key issues that may have had an impact, positive or negative, on the ultimate success of the class; reexamines the pre-observation form to establish a focus on the issues; and creates a framework for the postobservation conference. The principal is, in reality, writing a constructivist lesson plan from which he or she will conduct the postobservation conference.

During the postobservation conference, the principal asks questions that enable the teacher to self-assess his or her teaching sequence, taking care to work with the teacher as a colleague and to use the common vocabulary established earlier at the pre-observation conference and during previous inservice workshops. By the conclusion of the postobservation conference, the principal and the teacher should come to consensus on the overall effectiveness of the class, including the strategies that were most effective, the ones that may need to be modified, and those that were effective but could be improved. The results of the supervisory sequence may then serve as the basis for discussion for the next observation and could be a basis for future inservice topics if common themes emerge across the faculty.

Cautions
This integrated model gives teachers the opportunity to become reflective practitioners and enables teachers and principals to incorporate concepts and strategies from ongoing, long-term staff development efforts based upon the individual needs of the teacher. Giving teachers valid feedback and information about their teaching strategies and behaviors—as well as the autonomy to act upon that information with the support of the principal—takes teachers beyond a passive, checklist model of instructional supervision. Aligning the issues and topics of the instructional supervisory process with the issues and topics that are at the core of the staff development program enables the principal to improve the quality of instruction teacher by teacher; provide ongoing support; and promote a collegial environment that encourages teachers to become their own single, biggest critics.

Because this approach may be implemented using the existing supervisory framework, it does not necessarily require increased funding. If there is no long-range vision for the goals of the school in general and for the staff development program, however, the principal and the staff must establish a framework to provide the time for key stakeholders to come together on a regular basis to create that common vision, which may require funding. Further, the extent to which the teacher is able to effectively self-assess directly correlates to the instructional maturity that a teacher possesses, which does not necessarily correlate to the number of years that a teacher has taught. Some teachers may require a more tightly focused approach. Principals must develop an IEP-like approach for each teacher.

Finally, principals must recognize that they are also developing their supervisory knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Sample Postobservation Questions
These questions may be modified for use for teacher self-analysis of a videotaped class before the postobservation conference. The teacher needs to know that he or she won’t be required to turn in the self-analysis form or the videotape.

Did the students meet the stated objectives?

What did we see and hear that could demonstrate that the students met the stated objectives? What did we see them doing and hear them saying that will allow us to infer mastery?

What did you do (e.g., strategy employed, sequence of material presented, level of questions, and student involvement) that specifically contributed to the success of this lesson?

If you had to present this same concept to these same students again for the first time, what would you do differently? Why?

What situations (moments within the class period) were you uncomfortable with regarding selected strategies, questions, and student responses?

Did the students respond in a manner consistent with your expectations? Why or why not?

What situations (moments within the class period) were you comfortable regarding selected strategies, questions, and student responses?

What area or aspect of your teaching would you like to explore further, seek additional information, or obtain additional feedback?

Other observations? What do you know now about your teaching that you may not have known before?
They must endeavor to develop the broad base of knowledge of pedagogy along with the concepts and skills required to implement a model of instructional supervision that will yield ongoing professional learning. They must resist the urge to provide the analysis, answers, and feedback to the teacher in a top-down manner. A constructivist approach, while more time-consuming, has longer lasting benefits (Danielson & McGreal, 2000).

Conclusion
If a school’s goal is to improve the quality of the educational environment that it provides for its students—one that encourages creative thinking and problem solving, cooperative learning, and higher levels of thinking—then a principal must create the same type of atmosphere for those individuals most directly responsible for the success of students and schools, namely teachers. A model that allows principals to integrate the two, sometimes-disconnected functions of instructional supervision and staff development will contribute to achieving the goal of schools as learning organizations and will help students in each and every classroom achieve.

References