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How School Leaders Can Use Formative Assessment Strategies to Enhance School Climate

Summary: Formative assessment is widely implemented in the classroom to provide both teachers and students timely feedback about learning. A growing body of applications of formative practice has emerged over the last few decades that is based upon research. This is a highly successful approach that has the potential to serve school leaders and enhance school climate and culture. In this manuscript how school leaders can apply formative assessment concepts and strategies to assess and improve working relationships is examined. Specific strategies that principals, teacher leaders, and superintendents can use are reviewed. Discussed are the reflective practice that is facilitated by use of such strategies and how this experience is received by the constituencies a leader serves.

Keywords: Formative assessment, reflective assessment, leadership strategies, school climate

Резюме (Джон Б. Бонд: Как руководство школы может изменить формальные стратегии оценки для улучшения школьной атмосферы): Творческое оценивание на уроке широко применяется в настоящее время, чтобы предоставлять как учителям, так и ученикам своевременную информацию об образовательном прогрессе. В последние десятилетия развилось большое количество способов применения креативного подхода к оценкам, и эти подходы основываются на результатах научных исследований. Это очень успешный подход, который имеет потенциал как для поддержки руководства школы, так и для улучшения школьного климата и культуры. В данной статье рассматривается, каким образом руководство школы может применять креативные концепты и стратегии для диагностики и улучшения рабочих отношений. Проанализированы определённые стратегии, которые руководство школы, учителя и административный персонал могут применять на практике. Обсуждается практика рефлексии, которая становится легче посредством применения этих стратегий, а также каким образом этот опыт применяется школьным советом, которому подчиняются учителя.

Ключевые слова: формальная оценка, рефлексивная оценка, стратегии управления, школьный климат

Zusammenfassung (John B. Bond: Wie Schulleiter formative Bewertungsstrategien für die Verbesserung des Schulklimas nutzen können): Die kreative Bewertung ist im Unterricht weitgehend implementiert worden, um sowohl den Lehrerinnen und Lehrern als auch Schülerinnen und Schülern rechtzeitige feedbacks über das Lernen zu bieten. In den letzten Jahrzehnten hat sich eine wachsende Zahl von Anwendungen der kreativen Praxis herausgebildet, die auf Forschung basiert. Dies ist ein sehr erfolgreicher Ansatz, der das Potenzial hat, Schulleitungen zu unterstützen sowie das Schulklima und die Schulkultur zu verbessern. In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie Schulleitungen kreative Konzepte und Strategien zur Beurteilung und Verbesserung der Arbeitsbeziehungen anwenden können. Geprüft werden spezifische Strategien, die Schulleitungen, Lehrerinnen und Lehrer sowie Schulverwaltungen verwenden können. Diskutiert wird die reflektierende Praxis, die durch die Verwendung solcher Strategien erleichtert wird, und wie diese Erfahrung von den Wahlgremien aufgenommen wird, in deren Dienst die Lehrkräfte stehen.

Schlüsselwörter: formative Bewertung, reflektierende Bewertung, Führungsstrategien, Schulklima

Introduction

Formative assessment is widely implemented in the classroom to provide both teachers and students timely feedback about learning. A growing body of applications of formative practice has emerged over the last few decades that is based upon research (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Bond, Denton, & Ellis, 2015; Bond & Ellis, 2013; Dignath & Büttner, 2008). Formative assessment is also an effective approach for school leaders to apply regarding enhancing school climate and culture. A mammoth body of scholarly theory and research exists regarding metacognition on which formative assessment based. Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) suggested that school climate is composed of four essential dimensions: safety, teaching and learning, relationship, and environmental structure. It is the third dimension—relationships—that is of most relevance in this examination of formative assessment application. In this paper will be explored how a formative assessment approach can be applied by school principals to enhance the relationships that undergird a positive school climate.

Theory

Formative assessment is nested in the huge construct of metacognition. Metacognition, or *thinking about thinking* has been focused upon by scholars for decades. Such esteemed theorists as Dewey (1933), Flavell (1979), and Black and Wiliam (1998) have articulated how reflection is central to learning. Dewey (1933) also emphasized that professional actions and consequences should be reflected upon. This has naturally led to research on a wide range of reflective practice both in and outside of the classroom. The development of reflective strategies harnesses the power of metacognition that enhances learning regardless of setting, situation, or role. Increasingly, this formative assessment approach is being discussed in the literature regarding leadership.

Prominent in the current era has been the seminal work of Donald Schön whose writing has underpinned research on reflective practice as it applies to professionals since the 1980s (Zhao, 2003). As did Dewey (1933), Schön (1983) theorized that reflection is situated in action. Schön (1983; 1987) emphasized that reflection is both practical and useful for professionals and that it should be done during action as well as after-the-fact.

Reflection-in-Action

In the 1980s Donald Schön (1983; 1987) articulated a contrast between reflection that occurs after the fact and reflection that occurs in the moment. Schön coined the term *reflection-in-action* to describe the metacognitive experience that occurs during an activity. To explain how this learning is different, Schön used the examples of how jazz musicians ad lib creatively and how emergency room doctors decide how to treat unexpected and unpredictable crises (1987, p. 35). Both examples require in-the-moment reflection and prompt action, sometimes in a trial and error mode. It is this trial and error that is the metacognitive experience, but occurring in the blink of an eye as the urgency of the music, life-saving action, or any unexpected situation that requires immediate response. Similar to Schön's example of the medical doctor's experience where "about 85% of the cases (...) are not 'in the book'" (Schön, 1987, p. 35), the school principal is regularly confronted with situations that require an immediate response, often with the eyes of others upon them. It is a cycle of learning, a metacognitive example, and formative assessment applied to the real world.

Knowing in practice. Schön stated that “competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They exhibit a kind of *knowing-in-practice*, most of which is tacit” (Schön, 1983, p.vii). In applying this concept to the workplace Schön used the term *professional artistry* to refer to “the kinds of competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice” (Schön, 1987, p. 22). When familiar routines present themselves, professionals draw on a reservoir of knowledge, or knowing-in-practice, and often act without conscious reflection. However, experiences frequently contain an element of surprise, which causes a professional to either reflect on action by pausing to consider the situation, or reflect in action by reflecting “in the midst of action without interrupting it” (Schön, 1987, p. 26).

Ferraro (2000) stated that reflection in and on action should be cyclical in nature with the outcomes of one informing the other. The terms on-line and off-line are sometimes used to describe metacognitive methods that occur during (on-line) or after (off-line) an event (Bannert & Mengelkamp, 2008). Hart stated that “thinking well, especially developing the habit of reflecting on what one knows before and while acting, improves the quality and creativity of choices and eventually contributes to the knowledge available in subsequent choices” (Hart, 1990, p. 153). Reflection-in-action is an immediate process that occurs in the context of action without after-the-fact analysis (Schön, 1987; Waters, 2005).

Review of the Literature

While the research literature on metacognition is rich and growing (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Bond & Ellis, 2013; Costa & Kalick, 2000; Dignath & Büttner, 2008; Scriven, 1991; Swartz & Perkins, 1989; Schön, 1983, 1987; Wiliam & Thompson, 2008), the emphasis has been on student learning and teacher pedagogy. Few scholarly articles and research reports focus on the metacognitive practice of school leaders (McCotter, 2009; Wright, 2008).

School Climate

A plethora of scholarly research articles and studies may be found related to school climate. Consistently the role of the principal is reported as an important factor in positive school climate. Cohen et al. (2009) found in a review of research that school climate is associated with and predictive of academic achievement, school success, violence prevention, students' healthy development, and teacher retention. They concluded that a gap exists between the research on school climate and the policies that govern public education. The authors advocated for a stronger and more direct emphasis upon effective strategies that enhance school climate.

In a recent study, Dou, Devos, and Valcke (2016) investigated the autonomy gap between teachers and principals and how this relates to overall school climate. In a study of 26 secondary schools in China the researchers found that teacher satisfaction and commitment to the organization was significantly influenced by the approach of the leader. Not surprisingly, Dou and colleagues found stronger teacher satisfaction and commitment when principals were collaborative rather than controlling. These findings are consistent with those of Williams (2009) who found that leadership behavior enhances school climate when it is aligned with the beliefs and commitments of teachers. As Williams stated, a principal's “...attitudes, expectations, policies, practices, and leadership style set the tone for a school climate” (Williams, 2009, p. 17).

In a case study of a Title I middle school Sterrett and Irizarry (2015) examined how a principal used feedback from teachers to address issues related to school climate. Emphasized were collaboration between administrators and teachers, increased teacher leadership opportunities, and enhanced professional development. Similarly, Glassman (1994) found that the principal who treats the teachers in a professional manner enhances academic achievement. These behaviors include displaying trust, communicating confidence, and demonstrating respect to create a comfortable and caring environment.

Values and Trust

In contrast to the lack of scholarly research on reflective practices of school principals, large body of research exists on how such factors as values, trust, and relationship influence school climate and teacher satisfaction. The connection between values and behaviors is prominent in the literature on school leaders (Begley, 2006; Goldman, 1998; Lazaridou, 2007). Research on problem solving has shown that when faced with complex situations, school leaders rely upon personal values to influence their responses (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Mumford, Gessner, Connelly, O'Connor, & Clifton, 1993). In emphasizing the importance of a leader's values, Burns (1978) stated that outstanding managerial performance is characterized by the presence of honesty, fairness, equal respect for individuals, autonomy, and democratic governance. Similarly, Begley (2006) proposed that self-knowledge, moral reasoning, and sensitivity to others are prerequisites for authentic leadership by school principals. Begley (2006) found four motivational factors that influence principals' decisions—self-interest, consensus, consequences, and ethics— and suggested that principals need to reflect on them in order to understand their true intentions.

The literature is rich with research regarding the trust relationship between leaders and subordinates (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Ciancutti & Steding, 2000; Hsu & Mujtaba, 2007; Turk et al., 2010). Within this construct a substantial and growing body of research exists focusing on the principal-teacher relationship (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Gimbel, 2003; Hallam & Hausman, 2009; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Tschannen-Moran (2001) found that teacher-principal collaboration was strongly related to trust. Effective relationships among school stakeholders—principals, teachers, and parents—are pivotal for schools to be successful (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hallam & Hausman, 2009). Relationships of trust between teachers and principals take time to develop (Ciancutti & Steding, 2000), yet are essential for collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Clearly, in this era of accountability and the pressures that accompany it, there is a premium placed on the interpersonal skills of school leaders (Hallam & Hausman, 2009, p. 403). Several factors are seen as critical in the development and sustenance of trust relationships between teachers and principals. These include a principal's approachability and listening skills (John & Taylor, 1999), the absence of suspicion in the principal's motives (Ciancutti & Steding, 2000), sensitivity to others (Begley, 2006), and equitable treatment of staff members (Burns, 1978). According to Turk and colleagues, "...when people are honest, not only with each other, but also with themselves, the bonds of trust become that much stronger" (Turk et al., 2010, p. 1).

Formative Assessment Strategies for Principals

Effective use of formative assessment is much more than just giving a faculty an exit slip or short survey. As important as the actual information collected is how it collected and followed-up on. Implemented

with skill and savviness a formative assessment cycle can enhance trust in a leader, a key factor in school climate and culture. And, of course, it is a powerfully effective tool in unveiling and resolving problems that can erode school climate.

Principals and other leaders need to craft formative assessment strategies that serve both groups and individuals. While school climate is typically thought of as single judgment, it is actually a pattern based on the input and opinions of individuals. As Cohen and colleagues stated, "...school climate is more than individual experience: It is a group phenomenon that is larger than any one person's experience" (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 180). That said, the actual formative strategies principals employ must be designed to elicit feedback from individuals. Often gathering formative feedback is done in response to perceived school climate, either positive or negative, too often just the latter. Yet, consistent with the theme of this paper, such efforts should be made on a regular basis with the intent of both monitoring climate and using the feedback to improve it.

Grojean and colleagues identified seven mechanisms "...by which leaders and members transmit values and create climates related to ethics" (Grojean et al., 2004, p. 223). These include values-based leadership, setting the example, setting ethical expectations, providing feedback, recognizing and rewarding behaviors that support organizational values, awareness of individual differences, and training and mentoring. While all seven of the dimensions are applicable to improving school climate, it is the second dimension—set the example—that is most relevant to this discussion. As Grojean and colleagues stated:

The behavior of leaders is a powerful communication mechanism that conveys the expectations, values and assumptions of the culture and climate to rest of the organization. Leaders are role models of appropriate behavior and their actions have a strong influence over the ethical conduct of followers, as well as its climate regarding ethics...Observed behaviors that have desired consequences become part of an individual's repertoire, and later become translated into actual behavior in the appropriate situation (Grojean et al., 2004, p. 228).

In a study of principals' social networks with schools, Moolenaar, Daly, and Slegers (2010) found a positive association between how close a principal was to team members and innovative climate. The authors defined "closeness centrality" as how involved a principal is with teachers and how quickly a principal can reach all team members through the social network. Closeness centrality can thus be interpreted as a measure of "reachability" by the principal (Moolenaar et al., 2010, p. 627).

Monitoring Climate

Successful principals constantly monitor the climate and culture in the school they serve. It is an essential practice that occurs on an ongoing basis as a principal goes about his or her daily tasks. Much of this is intuitive and subjective based on interactions, experiences, and in-the-moment judgments. Theorist Donald Schön (1987) referred to such professional behavior as *knowing in practice* as professional behavior is reflected upon. However, while Schön's work emphasizes the mental reflection on such things as school climate, there are practical and tangible strategies that can be employed regarding school climate and culture. Successful leaders embrace both approaches—the internal reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983; 1987) and the external feedback strategies.

As with reflective assessment strategies used in the classroom (Ellis, 2001) there are simple and effective feedback strategies that leaders can use when their intuition tells them it is the right time. How these are employed, however, is just as important as the actual tool.

Anonymous feedback. First of all, it is essential that anonymity be ensured when requesting feedback or input from those a principal leads. Sterrett and Irizarry describe this as “...checking the pulse...” (Sterrett & Irizarry, 2015, p. 11) to identify what is and is not working and to solicit comments and insights. This accomplishes two important things. First, it invites genuine feedback without fear of retaliation. A principal who makes this a safe experience builds trust and respect. Second, a principal models humility and courage when she or he asks for anonymous feedback. Teachers and other staff members usually understand the risks involved for the leader with anonymous feedback and typically respect and admire such courage. While some may take advantage of the opportunity to vent frustrations, the unveiling of such concerns leads to healthy discussion and reflection by a staff. When one hesitates to make the feedback or input anonymous there is cause for some deep reflection, for while seemingly threatening, it is actually a path toward improved relationships and building trust.

Small scale. While there are many online tools for surveying groups anonymously, these can be lengthy and thus discourage busy professionals from completing them. Return rates are often low with online surveying and this can be problematic when outlier data drives the results and subsequent perceptions. Online surveys are also impersonal and do not provide the opportunity for the in-person engagement between a principal and those she or he serves. Rather than an annual comprehensive climate survey, employing small-scale feedback experiences through a school year offers a formative approach to seeking timely feedback and input. For example, a principal might ask for teacher input at the end of staff meeting regarding a specific issue, such as student behavior, testing procedures, dealing with a scheduling problem, engaging with challenging parents, or special education inclusion, to name a few. Small scale feedback should be simple and concise—one issue only, hand-written on a half-sheet of paper or index card, requiring only a few minutes to complete. Asking a staff member to collect the exit slips as the principal leaves the meeting early emphasizes the intent of anonymity and conveys a collaborative intent.

Staying ahead of problems. Formative strategies are especially useful when issues among a staff are brewing just below the surface. Wise principals intuitively know that the pressure must be released while a problem is small to avoid bigger challenges down the road. For example, such unrelated problems as playground or passing time misbehavior, teacher voice on program decisions, scheduling of classes, or parent engagement should be addressed one issue at a time. If left unattended, though, multiple concerns are sometimes lumped together and packaged as evidence that the principal is irresponsible or ineffective. Savvy leaders know that perceptions are formed and judgments made with or without accurate information. The rumor mill does indeed exist in the schoolhouse, as anyone who has served as a teacher knows. Awareness of this common phenomenon should serve as added motivation for principals to regularly “check the temperature” regarding school climate so that concerns can be addressed while still manageable. Principals must respond to *emerging* issues to avoid *emergency* issues. Inviting those most involved—teachers, playground supervisors, coaches, bus drivers, etc.—to provide timely input on how to resolve an issue avoids the path to bigger problems and possible crises.

When a principal takes the initiative to seek input she or he owns the issue and is in control of the process. This pre-empts others from taking control of the situation. The principal’s nightmare of the union

unexpectedly conducting a climate survey does indeed occur on occasion when a leader has ignored or is oblivious to the signs of discontent. While school climate problems and concerns can be extremely challenging to resolve, it is by far simpler when a principal takes initiative to understand and unravel them while they are small. We have all heard tales or observed from a distance a case where a principal's leadership capital evaporated. Wise principals swallow their pride before this happens and deal with potential problems while they are manageable.

Modeling for Those You Lead. A principal's character is just as, or more, important than her or his knowledge and skills. This point, of course, can be argued and ideally all three—character, knowledge, skills— are of equal importance. Yet, in times of climate upheaval it is character that gets a principal through a crisis. When a principal stands in front of those she or he leads and asks for their suggestions of how to better serve their needs it is powerful modeling of both courage and humility. Jim Collins in the book *Good to Great* (2001) described a great leader as someone who is equally committed and humble. Few would disagree about the importance of these traits. In a school most constituencies want a gentle and collaborative leader, and at the same time, one who can step up when strong leadership is needed. So, how can a leader's character be modeled in the midst of a growing problem?

Transparency is powerful. When a staff has provided anonymous feedback to a principal it is imperative that this data be shared with them. Kept confidential by the principal can exacerbate a problem, for once issues are called to attention there is an obligation to act upon them. Sharing the anonymous feedback avoids this pitfall and done with skill is itself a climate building step. When a principal shares the results in-person it is a unique opportunity to model character, display humility, and exemplify courage. Doing so makes transparent both the actual feedback from the staff and the personal character of the principal. Both are of high importance.

Handwritten, not digital. An advantage of handwritten, rather than digital, feedback is that a principal can use the actual documents—the index cards, as mentioned above—to review the data in-person in front of those who gave the input. The actual feedback slips should then be shared with all who provided input. This can easily be done by routing them during the staff meeting and also be made available after the meeting. Keeping this data on paper is an intentional strategy to reduce the opportunity for in-house “dirty laundry” being shared beyond those directly involved. E-mail and especially social media are usually not productive avenues for resolving issues of school climate. While digital tools simplify and expedite communication, they present risks when a principal is trying to resolve a complicated climate problem.

Follow-through is essential. Open discussion with staff members regarding the concerns and suggestions offered is the beginning of a plan of action. This must be followed up with action steps that are again visible to all. Periodic progress updates show a staff that their input was taken seriously. Done in a cyclical fashion allows initial outcomes to inform and guide subsequent actions (Ferraro, 2000). Ideally, the solutions grow out of teacher input and the outcomes are owned by staff members and supported by the principal. Done with skill, finesse, and transparency what initially is concern about the leader becomes a group-owned problem. It is a real-life example of the classic folk saying “making lemonade out of lemons.”

Keeping the issue alive through discussion and proactive steps is the final stage of this process. Obviously, trying to put a problem to rest before it has been thoroughly processed can be a fatal error. Wise principals let the perceptions of the staff guide them on when to consider the problem resolved.

Conclusion

Formative assessment strategies are useful tools for principals, just as they are for teachers in the classroom. This is especially true regarding monitoring and enhancing school climate and culture. When principals use small-scale feedback strategies to gather anonymous input from teachers and staff members it is in itself trust-building. When principals humbly seek the input of those they serve it models an openness and transparency that both empowers teachers and enhances the principal's leadership platform.

Enhancing school climate is a complex and challenging endeavor. Over time principals accumulate effective strategies, tactics, and tools as their knowledge grows and professional artistry matures (Schön, 1987). Similar to how a teacher uses formative assessment in the classroom to guide instruction, principals can apply the same approach to enhance school climate. How principals apply strategies, though, is just as important as the tools themselves. Done with humility, collaboration, and patience principals can shift the attention from their own perceived behaviors or weaknesses to a shared ownership of issues and problems.

When teachers trust a leader and feel safe to express their views the full power of a group can be harnessed. Innovation requires risk taking and leaders must set the stage for this to occur.

Principals who strive to apply formative assessment concepts and strategies to in their daily interactions walk a path toward enhancing school climate and culture.

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