

Practicum Final Reflection Essay

North Dakota State University

As part of my practicum experience, I decided to focus on the areas that I wanted to continue my learning; supervision, staff development, and management of resources. These are very broad areas that cover several indicators, for this reason I chose a few from each area. One area centered on supervision which was also my last course in the program. I thought it might be a great experience to learn about the theory of supervision while applying these skills in an authentic setting. I chose the area of staff development simply because it is the field I am passionate about and I had a great opportunity to research and create a plan for improving our district new teacher induction program. Then, after reflecting on my program learning, I decided to learn more about managing school resources. I learned much from my program courses, but I think the real learning is truly applying that knowledge and creating an authentic district budget sheet and an authentic school schedule alongside a current administrator. These three areas kept me very busy in the last six months.

Area #1: Supervision

According to *Leading Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, published by National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), one of the roles that are tied to indicators of what constitutes a first-rate school is to lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center. Schools must be a learning community or “a place where students and adults alike are responsible not only for student learning but for their own learning and that of their colleagues. Behind this definition is the belief that when adults stop learning, so do students.

To help teachers become responsible for their learning, first, as an instructional leader, I will model learning by always staying current with best practices and reading the latest research. Secondly, I will meet with ALL individual staff to set professional goals and a study plan showing how they will achieve these goals for the year. I know this is difficult but it can be done if it is deemed a priority. These goals should reflect the school goals and vision. I plan to go over the district teaching standards, guide teachers to select at least two standards and develop goals. They also will need to plan on how they will show they reached their goal. It could be a reflection, a program from the workshop, a unit they created, collected data, etc. This leads teachers to take ownership in their learning and not rely solely on the school or district to provide their professional development. However, setting goals alone may not fulfill the motivation needs of each member without specific feedback from the principal and recognizing good work and effort when deserved.

I agree that principals need to be supportive instructional leaders, but they also need to set high expectations and follow-through as well. In schools where resources and training are abundant but little or no expectations exist, little change occurs. Supervision and accountability ensure things happen. An effective school leader sets expectations and hold teachers accountable through supervision and evaluation. With no critique, no support, or no feedback, instruction will not improve. That is why “it is high time the duties of the position begin to match the title.”(Schmoker, 2006, p.157).

Teacher evaluations should impact the quality of what is taught or how well it is taught. “You can’t guarantee what you don’t monitor” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 38). For that reason, walkthroughs have become increasingly popular to use as formative assessment for

administrators. I was fortunate enough to go to the ASCD conference in California. I made sure to attend Robert Marzano's presentation on teacher effectiveness and evaluation. His new book coming out this spring focuses on improving teacher evaluation using walkthroughs as formative assessment before the evaluation. I do like how Marzano's walkthroughs are directly tied to your district teaching standards. If teachers are setting goals to the district teaching standards, evaluations and informal walkthroughs should also be tied to those same standards. It just makes sense.

Marzano also mentioned implementing instructional rounds which is similar to our current lab network. Another activity I committed to in my practicum contract was to revise our current Lab Classrooms. It is my mission to find a way to make our current lab network more effective. It is only successful in pockets and I want to be able to repeat it. Through my research I was able to gather examples and ideas from Marzano's presentation, an interview with a literacy consultant, Steve Dunn, and reading a document that detailed Boston School district's lab process.

Marzano suggested having those teachers who perform high on your district teacher standards or framework to be the hosts. Principals can visit these classrooms as visions of what is best practice. The Boston Lab structure is around the workshop also, but focuses on particular lessons and strategies. It involves the coach working with each of the teacher's involved in the lab. It is not focused on a talent of one teacher, but shows that all teachers can be effective when coached. Steve Dunn, a literacy consultant, suggests implementing a lab classroom in every building. Coaches would work with the lab teacher to improve common practices such as student engagement, management, differentiation, etc. before others are allowed to observe or do

walkthroughs. I feel all three models show teachers that anyone can become expert teachers with reflection and collaboration with a coach.

It seems every time I research how we can improve our current lab, it leads back to the instructional coach working with the lab teacher to better improve their instruction before others come to observe. This demonstrates that anyone can become an expert teacher with reflection and collaboration with a coach. I highly suggested this to our curriculum director and this is something we will start to look at and possibly pilot next year.

Another part of the supervision area in my practicum was to learn more about teacher improvement plans. The best way to do this was to interview a principal who has gone through this process successfully and maybe not so successfully. I learned a great deal from the principal I chose to interview. He has worked with many teachers on improvement plans and presently has talked four teachers out of the career, all with integrity and respect. This sounds harsh, but I believe students deserve the best and if there is an individual who is not right for the job, then they should leave the profession.

I wrote down his process, which is very similar to the process I learned in my supervision class. He said that he didn't start this process until he attended a state leadership course that focused on coaching and conferencing with teachers. This gave him the confidence to work with teachers. When I mentioned that I heard many teachers who are placed on improvement plans involve the union, he replied that because he follows the process closely, the teachers he works with do not see the need to involve the union. He inferred that those who involved the union in the situations I mentioned were due to the fact that the principal skipped some steps in the

process which made the teacher feel cheated. When steps are followed consistently, teachers are treated with integrity and respect.

I learned from him and my course that it takes hard work to work with an individual teacher, observing, coaching and documenting. I believe this is the biggest job of the principal, but I know it will be tough to prioritize due to other duties and responsibilities.

During Marzano's presentation at the ASCD conference, he asked a question about teacher improvement that stuck with me. "Why is that the only teachers who are put on improvement plans are those who are on their way out of the profession? Shouldn't we all be improving?" That question is so enlightening. Wouldn't it be great if our districts and schools shifted to that habit of mind?

Another task under the supervision area was to observe a new teacher. This proved to be a challenging task. Even at the end of their first year, teachers are not comfortable inviting other peers into their classroom to give them feedback on their instruction. Mike Schmoker explains the reason for teacher isolation in his book, *Results Now*. He describes in detail the "buffers" that American schools have created which have led to the illusion that a high percentage of schools are effective. This "buffer" that Schmoker describes has led to teacher isolation, lack of quality instruction, and to the reality that administrators have little impact on the quality of instruction. I completely agree with his statements and used teacher isolation and lack of quality instruction to convince principals and other stakeholders the need for strategists to mentor new teachers on a weekly basis. If you start this foundation and philosophy with new teachers, within five years, a majority of your teachers will have a culture of coaching and reflection. This leads me to the next area I focused on: staff development.

Area #2: Staff Development

Because of the No Child Left Behind reform policies; there is a sense of urgency to ensure all students will learn and progress. To achieve this, there has been a shift from traditional instructional approaches to more scientific research-based teaching strategies. This has brought many changes in the teaching world and has made many educators uncomfortable. In my current supporting role, I have spent most of my time selling and participating in the new changes. My initial trainings have always focused on the “what,” “when,” and “how,” but I realized I needed to focus on the “why” of the new concept or approach as well. It is important that teachers know the reasons and research in order to “buy into” the new approaches. My realization made during my Education Leadership course and my professional experience with implementation and change led me to focus on the “why” when researching and planning for the improvement of our district’s new teacher induction program.

As part of my initial research, Dr. Cooper recommended completing a gap analysis of our current induction program to the state’s new teacher induction standards. Since North Dakota currently does not have this in place, I used Minnesota’s since we work closely with Minnesota’s universities pre-service teachers. It clearly showed all of things we currently have in place and those indicators that we yet need to implement in order to become a full-comprehensive teacher induction program. These indicators include providing approved time for mentor and new teacher interactions on a weekly basis, instilling career-long dispositions for reflective practice, and providing ongoing professional development and support for our mentors.

The New Teacher Center Symposium in San Jose, California was the start of my research into implementing a comprehensive new teacher induction program. My mission was to listen to other district journeys and struggles, network to gather ideas from other districts, and to improve the support our new teachers need to not only survive the first few years of their career but to also impact student achievement.

I synthesized all the information I gathered at the NTC symposium and from the Internet and created a draft plan of implementation. I included goals, mission, what is currently missing, and how we can show impact from our implementation. These pieces get to the heart of the “why.” I now believe it is important to do this for every initiative involved at a school or district. If this is not done, teachers see “little connection between what is being demanded and her or his own internal sense of fulfillment” (Owens and Valesky, 2007, p. 383). Little change will occur.

My first stakeholder meeting was convincing my elementary curriculum team the need to go to a comprehensive program. Actually, they already knew of the need, they just didn’t know where we could start. I didn’t either until I researched possibilities and put my draft plan together. They liked the ideas and wanted to move forward. I was careful in what parts of the draft I shared with them. I didn’t want to overwhelm them, so I chose the areas that they were interested in and had questions pertaining to the plan. I know as a future principal, sharing critical pieces with various stakeholders (teachers, parents, etc.) is important as not to overwhelm. It is a fine balance and you really need to know who your stakeholders are to do this successfully.

I created and presented a Prezi for the groups of people who needed to be convinced that we need to provide approved time for coaches/mentors to meet with new teachers and provide

coaching and reflection to help improve student achievement. My main concern was convincing a few of the elementary principals who would be concerned with the amount of PD during contract time, the building strategists who would be concerned about their new job responsibility, and the FEA president because of the time used for weekly coaching. Again, convincing and persuading is something principals need to do often especially when constantly dealing with change and improvement. A leader must not only show logical evidence but meet the emotional needs of stakeholders in order to achieve consensus on a decision. The presentation went well. There were a few principals and strategists that still had questions and concerns, but I quickly met with them and clarified any misunderstandings. I realize this individual attention is critical to any change or implementation. This is part of the decision making process where consensus versus unanimity is key.

I view change as a positive and necessary part of an organization even though it can be a dirty process. Research has indicated that teachers who spontaneously sought some form of role shift every four or five years were more likely than other teachers to be happy in their work. I have personally had several role shifts in the last ten years. I believe it has enhanced my effectiveness and career satisfaction. It is challenging, but it has also offered opportunities of stimulation and growth.

Most find change difficult. Even when we make an apparent small change like adopting a new textbook, we find that we need something new--new teacher made materials, new ways of providing extra support for struggling students, etc. Change requires enormous amounts of energy and time, well beyond what schools provide for in-service learning. There is also the fear of failing our students during our trials and errors. That is not fair to our students.

But change is necessary. The world around us is in constant flux, so to maintain status quo, we must make continual adjustments. Especially with the speed of technology innovation in the last twenty years, the education system is in for a long overhaul. Like I mentioned before, change can be a dirty process. However, if done correctly, the impact change can have on an organization can be profound. Change efforts have their intended effects only when teachers are invested in them. Andy Hargreaves stated, “If a teacher won’t do it, it can’t be done” (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001, p. 120).

As a leader, my job is to reconnect teachers to the passion and excitement that drew them to teaching in the first place. I learned through my courses and practicum that it is my job to help staff members face the challenge of change with optimism and confidence. And as a result, students will benefit.

Area #3: Management of Resources

In *Leading Learning Communities*, principals outline what their role in school improvement can and should be. It is taking a fresh look at the role of school leader as a balance between instructional leader and manager. Influenced by the academic standards movement, principals themselves identify six characteristics of instructional leadership.

Standard Five of the NAESP standards mention leading continuous improvement. There were a few ideas that stuck with me as I read this standard during my Elementary Administration course. The last idea in this standard refers to providing time, structures, and opportunities for adults to plan, work, reflect, and celebrate. The biggest barrier elementary teachers have is time.

There is just not enough time in the day to fit one more thing in. Principals need to be creative in the schedule to provide time for teachers to collaborate and analyze data.

I was fortunate to work with a principal during the summer months to create next year's school schedule. Before I met with the principal, I was real excited about creating the schedule. But after talking with her and listening to the dilemmas that she tackles every time she creates one year after year, I realized that it would take me longer to accomplish this task than I originally thought. Her biggest dilemma is that her school is split into two separate campuses which make it difficult to share specialists and arrange their schedules.

To provide time for analyzing data, reflection, and collaboration, there were several priorities to keep in mind when I created the schedule.

1. To meet the needs of struggling learners, the staff decided to implement a daily 30-minute Intervention and Extension block specifically for literacy. The blocks need to be scheduled at the same time for K-2 and 3-5, as students may be shared across grade levels.
2. If teachers wanted to collaborate during math and language arts, the principal would like to see the blocks scheduled at the same time for each grade level.
3. Currently, all grade level teams meet every Wednesday afterschool to collaborate and analyze data as a professional learning team. One of the main concerns of the principal is to be able to meet with each grade level teams once a week, but this task proves difficult when all teams meet at the same time. Instead, she would like to meet during one of their common planning times. The problem is that the teachers do not have a common planning time. I was tasked with finding a solution to this problem.

The first thing I did was to read, *Elementary School Scheduling: Enhancing Instruction for Student Achievement*, which gave step-by-step suggestions on how to build a school schedule that promotes student achievement. I created two drafts. One follows the same current concept where 2 out of the 3 teachers have the same time during PE/music with the 3rd teacher having a separate planning time. I took the art schedule and plugged it in to accommodate the 3rd teacher, so the principal could meet with that team once a week. The 2nd schedule was what I call thinking “outside the box”. Students would either have music, art, PE, or library/computer on a ten day rotation. I had to add minutes to the PE/music daily block (from 40 to 50 minutes) because students would meet with them fewer times in the week and I had to maintain 1400 minutes total for a full time specialist. Of course, this would all need to be approved by the assistant superintendent. He may be interested in piloting this option.

Another practice I was tasked with is the school budget. I did not have the opportunity to help with a specific school budget, but I did have the opportunity to create a three year budget for the New Teacher Induction program. I knew this would be important as the budget would be a possible decision-maker in choosing whether to invest in the New Teacher Center (NTC) program. I created an elaborate budget which included bells and whistles and a bare bones budget which included just the essential components needed for implementation, hoping to finalize somewhere in the middle. Since the decision was made to invest in NTC, our task force has repeatedly referred back to the budget and revised it several times. Just as important as sharing the “why” when it comes to change, so is establishing a budget and timeline. You do not have a complete vision without these components.

Conclusion

What I continue to struggle with or question is the “how”. How can I make changes happen in my current district and set a sense of urgency? How can I convince our teachers the importance of the issues Schmoker addresses such as the lack of accountability and inconsistencies in instruction to ensure these issues do not happen? How can I remind them that it is not about us, but it is about the kids? I struggle with these questions and will continue to seek for the solutions until we have schools in which all students achieve at high levels.

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