

Reflecting on Reflective Practice

2023 SEL Exchange



Background

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, K-12 school staff in the U.S. have faced extensive challenges as they navigate drastic changes in their environment, routines, and instructional approaches. Despite these changes, the regular demands on staff have remained the same: they are expected to provide high-quality instruction for all students. Even before the pandemic began, staff were experiencing ongoing stressors, often leading to job dissatisfaction and burnout, while raising nationwide concerns around staff retention.

School leaders are seeking new ways to engage, support, and retain school staff in 2023. Schools leaders want staff to feel supported and valued, and to be able to meaningfully engage with students. To do that, leaders need to prioritize social and emotional competence and needs of school staff, acknowledging the impacts of the recent pandemic that have put unprecedented stress on students and school workforces.

There are many options for supporting staff self-efficacy and professional well-being. This document highlights reflective practices that can be readily integrated by school leadership. With many competing demands on principals and educational leaders, shifting our style of communication can help improve school climate and reduce teacher burnout—without adding significant demands to leadership or school staff.

Reflective Practices to Support School Staff

Reflective practices engage teachers and school support staff as learners, encouraging them to explore their daily practice with an eye toward growth and finding meaning in the work. According to Goker (2017), reflective practice can be conducted through coaching and supervision with the goals of increasing “one’s capacity to develop self-directedness, self-monitoring, and self-modification abilities” (p.7). A cognitive coaching model uses nonjudgmental reflection to support interactive dialogues, moving teachers and student support staff toward mutual learning, trust, and growth toward holonomy.¹ Peer coaching, study groups, and instructional rounds can help build a culture of reflective practice.

Reflective supervision is a process that supports learning and professional development as well as restorative functions such as emotional processing. It is relationship-based, consistent, collaborative, and invokes the supervisee’s own insights to facilitate growth (West et al., 2022). It is widely used to support workers in other child-serving fields, such as home visiting and social work, with the goals of improving job performance, job meaning and fulfillment, self-efficacy, curiosity, psychological well-being, stress management, and psychological well-being (West et al., 2022; Rankine et al., 2018; Ravalier et al., 2023; Shea, 2018). By using reflection and creating clear areas of focus (such as serving a particular child, strategies for coping and self-care, or confronting issues of race and equity) the supervisee is able to build autonomy and resiliency in complex and challenging circumstances.

¹ Holonomy is defined as “When a teacher has the ability to both self-regulate and be regulated by the shared norms and values of the school” (Costa & Garmston, 1994).

Benefits of Motivational Interviewing in Coaching and Supervision

School staff are most inclined toward personal and professional development when leaders channel their intrinsic motivation—to learn, to excel, to have impact. External demands and pressures provide extrinsic motivation (Liu et al., 2019), and generally do not evoke self-efficacy, which is key to deriving meaning and fulfillment from the work.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) draws components of reflective practice into a style of communication that lends itself well to coaching and professional development (Lee et al., 2014). The “spirit” of MI encourages school leaders to engage supervisees using four key elements: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evoking (Lee et al., 2014; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Having an empathic, affirming relationship with leaders empowers school staff to explore and pursue the changes they need to make to achieve their professional and personal goals. MI teaches that ambivalence toward change is normal and the possibility for positive change lies within the teacher themselves. Utilizing MI in coaching teachers has shown promise in promoting desire to change, known in MI as “change talk” (Pas et al., 2021). Different frameworks exist for incorporating MI into school-based settings (Frey et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2014); the table to the right describes sample tasks and activities that could incorporate the spirit of MI in supervision and coaching.

MI offers another benefit in school settings when it is modeled by principals and leaders: teachers may employ it in their own classroom practice. In one study, teachers found that MI techniques helped them become “more guiding and autonomy-supportive” of their students. They also saw benefits for conflict management and enhancing student motivation and wished to see it included in teacher education more broadly (Svensson et al., 2021).

Adopting and Sustaining Reflective Practices in Schools

Adopting reflective practices need not be daunting or overly prescriptive. Motivational Interviewing in particular is designed to be fluid and adaptable. Reflective practices can be employed ad hoc, in individual interactions or in group settings with school staff. If regular supervision is occurring, reflective supervision may help deepen trust and connection between teachers and principals.

Communities of practice (COPs) are groups that gather to disseminate and generate knowledge about a shared area of interest. If MI or reflective practices are being adopted, COPs can be created among school staff or among principals of different schools to consider implementation questions and share lessons learned. Teachers may be interested in peer coaching, which principals can support by provide reflective practice resources.

Lastly, outside coaches or consultation can be helpful for planning and strategizing implementation of reflective supervision or MI. This is especially true in a larger scale implementation—for example, if the practice is to be implemented across a district or with *all* school support staff. Independent consultants can provide objective input and guidance around best practices and sustainability.

How School Leaders Utilize Motivational Interviewing in Supervision

Activity	Tasks
Build a working alliance	Evoke the teacher’s perception of need for change Discover and affirm the teacher’s values Informally assess the classroom ecology
Share performance feedback	Encourage teacher to reflect on current practices Evoke teacher’s perception and interpretation of observational data
Offer education, consultation and support	Educate about self-care and well-being Model effective reflection and role play reflective skills Encourage and support goal setting Offer repeated observations and performance feedback

Adapted from Lee et al. (2014)

Suggested Reading

Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2023). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change and grow* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.

Edwards, H. (2023). *Reflective supervision in education: Using supervision to support pupil and staff wellbeing*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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Shea, S. E. (2018). Reflective supervision for social work field instructors: Lessons learned from infant mental health. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47, 61–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-018-0677-2>

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Correspondence

Hayley Landes, Policy Analyst, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, hlandes@chapinhall.org

Reiko Kakuyama-Villaber, Researcher, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, rkakuyama@chapinhall.org