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Teacher Beliefs of Reflective Thinking, Trust and Purpose in the Evaluative Process, and Its Influences on Instructional Improvement

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# TEACHER BELIEFS OF REFLECTIVE THINKING, PROFESSIONAL TRUST AND PURPOSE IN THE EVALUATIVE PROCESS, AND ITS INFLUENCES ON INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

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## Abstract

This study examines the interrelationship of three variables in the teacher evaluation process: reflective thinking, professional trust, and purpose, and their effects upon instructional improvement. The theoretical framework for this study is Senge's (2000) "Five Disciplines" of personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning and systems thinking. In this study, a total of 165 secondary teachers completed The Teacher's Analysis of Their Principal's Evaluation Style (TAPES) questionnaire, which was conducted in five school districts on Long Island by Card (2008). The survey consisted of 38 items, utilizing a five-point Likert scale, asking the existence and importance of the three variables. There was a high interrelationship among the three variables and instructional improvement. Reflective thinking was found to be the highest contributing factor in instructional improvement (existing and importance). In the case of instructional improvement (importance), trust and reflective thinking accounted for 39% of the variance; in the case of instructional improvement (existence), reflective thinking and purpose accounted for 78% of the variance.

## Introduction

In an era of "high stakes testing", (Freeman, 2003) policymakers and school officials face a daunting task, deciding which educational practices they need to employ in order to have all students attain mastery level. U.S. Federal mandates, such as the "No Child Left Behind Act" (2002) require teachers, principals, and other school leaders to reach multi-cultural students with divergent learning styles, abilities and values. (Fusarelli, 2004) Compounding this challenge are the requirements of the NCLB legislation that all schools achieve Annual Yearly Progress, with the goal of 100% of the nation's public school students pass mandatory state exams in English Language Arts and Mathematics by 2014. Failure to do so may mean loss of federal funding, state takeover of the public school district, or other government-imposed sanctions.

In order for schools to improve student learning and achievement, they must first improve the effectiveness of the classroom teachers. (Killion, 2002) Public schools are now educating an increasingly diverse student body (NCES, 2008) and educators today continue to face the dilemma of how to fulfill their multi-dimensional tasks of providing excellence in education to a diverse community of learners. (Hollins & Guzman, 2005)

This article focuses on the interrelationship of three variables as components of teacher evaluation procedures: purpose, professional trust and reflective thinking and their effects upon instructional improvement. This study examines the relationships of the existing practices and the importance of what teachers perceive to be most effective variables for student improvement. This study will build upon Senge's "Fifth Discipline" by examining which of the three variables (reflective thinking, professional trust and purpose) have the greatest impact on improving instruction.

## Literature Review

Successful schools are organized around student learning and there is a direct link between teacher effectiveness and student learning (Informed Educator Series, 2000). To facilitate student learning and achievement, instructional goals and priorities must be clearly defined, measurable and understood by teachers, students, parents and the community. Golhammer, Anderson and Krajewski (1969, 1980) indicated that the supervision of teachers not only evaluates present performance but is concerned with improving instructional effectiveness. In order to achieve professional mastery and instructional improvement, the evaluation procedure must include a clear purpose, a trusting relationship to invite conversation, collaborative networking and reflective thought before and after the observation.

The ability of administrators to guide instructional improvement is the key to creating standards-based change. In recognition of our student's different learning abilities and styles, their efforts must be supported by rigorous content and instruction, which are continually monitored through multiple forms of assessment, regular observations and evaluation. Effective teachers and teacher improvement through administrative evaluation are the keys to improved instruction and student performance. However, if schools are to be places where good teachers thrive and continual improvement of instruction occurs, a strong evaluative process demands that everyone rise to the same standard.

Classroom observation is an important part of evaluating the instructional skills of teachers, and to assist these teachers with detailed feedback regarding how teachers' effectiveness can be improved. The point of principal and peer observations is to ensure that all students are meaningfully engaged; actively learning and teachers are growing professionally. Through regular classroom observations, both formal and informal, administrators and teachers can assess their effectiveness in the classroom.

In high performing schools, a nurturing professional community is the essence of a school culture which stimulates and promotes learning. Evaluative processes need to provide a source for professional motivation where teachers feel invigorated, challenged professionally engaged, and empowered with a collective sense of responsibility and a common sense of purpose and values. Senge (2000) discusses the infrastructure of organizational action and states that the essential components of developing a learning culture are: reflective dialogue, unity of

purpose, collective focus on student learning, collaboration and norms of sharing, openness to improvement with deprivation of practice and critical review. These facets are the elements, that when included in the evaluation process, nurture a true collaborative culture of life-long learners.

Prior to Senge (2002), Wise, Darling-Hammond, McLauglin & Berstein (1984) suggested that when teachers become part of the evaluation process through active participation in the practice, the likelihood of their professional growth increases. In order to promote proficiency in reflective action, a teacher must share dialogue and collaboratively establish strategies to meet the needs of all student learners. Through this process, teachers learn to recognize good practice; to explore alternative methodology; to build images of competence and to think in the midst of acting. Zeichner (1987) contends that the emphasis of reflection is on the efficient application of professional knowledge to a given end, where goals and objectives are not subject to scrutiny, without the threat of consequence in this collaborative model.

Reflection is an interactive process of ongoing formative evaluations involving both thought and actions. It can be imagined as an ongoing conversation (Yinger, 1990) between present action, past experience and intentions for the future. It simultaneously operates in various time frames, and different spheres of foci. Reflection is a process of thinking about teaching and learning by monitoring cues for the extent to which they are within a corridor of tolerance and decision-making. The ability to adjust instruction (as appropriate) facilitates better achievement through teaching and learning goals. (McAlpine, 1999)

Reflective practitioners are educators who are united in their vision of appropriate teacher preparation, delivery and assessment of their objectives. Educating the reflective practitioner must be emphasized by learning, doing and coaching and the ability to reflect on why certain choices of practice are made.

Professional trust is not only crucial in establishing a productive collaborative relationship between teacher and administrator; it is the foundation on which all mutual respect is based. Lyman (1987) found trust to be an important key to supervisor's success in helping teachers to change behaviors. He found a correlation between trust and other factors, such as confidentiality, dealing with complaints, and the development of collaboration and participation in the process of supervision of instruction.

## Instrument

This study examines the interrelationship of three variables in the teacher evaluation process: reflective thinking, professional trust, and purpose, and their effects upon instructional improvement. A total of 165 secondary teachers completed The Teacher's Analysis of Their Principal's Evaluation Style (TAPES) questionnaire, which was conducted in five school districts on Long Island by Card (2006). The survey consisted of 38 items, utilizing a five-point Likert scale, asking the existence and importance of the three variables.

Card (2008) defined the four essential components of teacher evaluation: purpose, professional trust, reflective thinking and instructional improvement:

**Purpose:** "throughout the evaluation process, the teacher should feel supported and encouraged to grow; feeling at the conclusion of the evaluation some internal measure of growth." Teachers believe that this was important as a component of the evaluation process (mean of 23.9), but that it was not practiced in the existing evaluative structures (mean of 20.1). A mean of 25 indicates strong agreement that teachers feel their classroom observation practice is used to promote instructional improvement for the purpose of professional growth and for the purpose of teacher accountability.

**Professional Trust:** "mutual trust between teacher and evaluator is a major factor in the overall evaluation process. The observer promotes trust by volunteering personal information about himself / herself, maintaining confidentiality, following through on commitments made to the teacher and reacting to the teacher in an appropriate manner when that person is in need of support." Respondents reported there was a mean of 20.3 for the existence of this dimension and a reported mean of 22.3 for the importance of professional trust as a part of their classroom observational practices.

**Reflective thinking:** "the practice of documenting or discussing the quality or artifacts of a teacher's work that focuses on improvement. The artifacts of teaching include lesson plans, tests, reading lists, course outlines, samples of students' work and hand-outs used in class".

**Instructional improvement:** "provides the framework for which a lesson is developed and ensures that during the pre-conference elements, such as goals, teaching strategies, assessment techniques and data gathering procedures are clarified." During the post observation conference, the observer engages the teacher in a discussion about the following matter related to the lesson. (p51).

## Data Analysis

1. Interrelationship among the variables

**Table 1 – Correlations among the Exiting Practices – Trust, Purpose, and Reflective Thinking (n = 150)**

**Correlations**

| | | truste | purpe | instimpe | reflecte |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| truste | Pearson Correlation | | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | | | |
| | N | | | | |
| purpe | Pearson Correlation | .850** | | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | | | |
| | N | 149 | | | |
| instimpe | Pearson Correlation | .676** | .741** | | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | | |
| | N | 138 | 143 | | |
| reflecte | Pearson Correlation | .693** | .719** | .853** | |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 | .000 | |
| | N | 143 | 149 | 138 | |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As seen in the correlations Table 1, (existence) there was a significant correlation between reflective thinking and instructional improvement (.853), and a significant correlation between trust and purpose (.850). Instructional improvement had a high correlation with purpose (.741) and trust (.676). In the case of importance, as seen in Figure 2, there was a correlation between reflective thinking trust (.49), and a correlation between trust and purpose (.52), and a correlation between reflective thinking and purpose (.50).

2. Path analysis to predict instructional improvement.

A path analysis of the variables was conducted, using SPSS and plotted using AMOS. This analysis was performed twice; the first time to demonstrate the three variables that related to exiting practices, and the second showed the perceived level of importance of the three variables to each other and their relationship to instructional improvement.

Path Analysis – Using "Existing" Variables

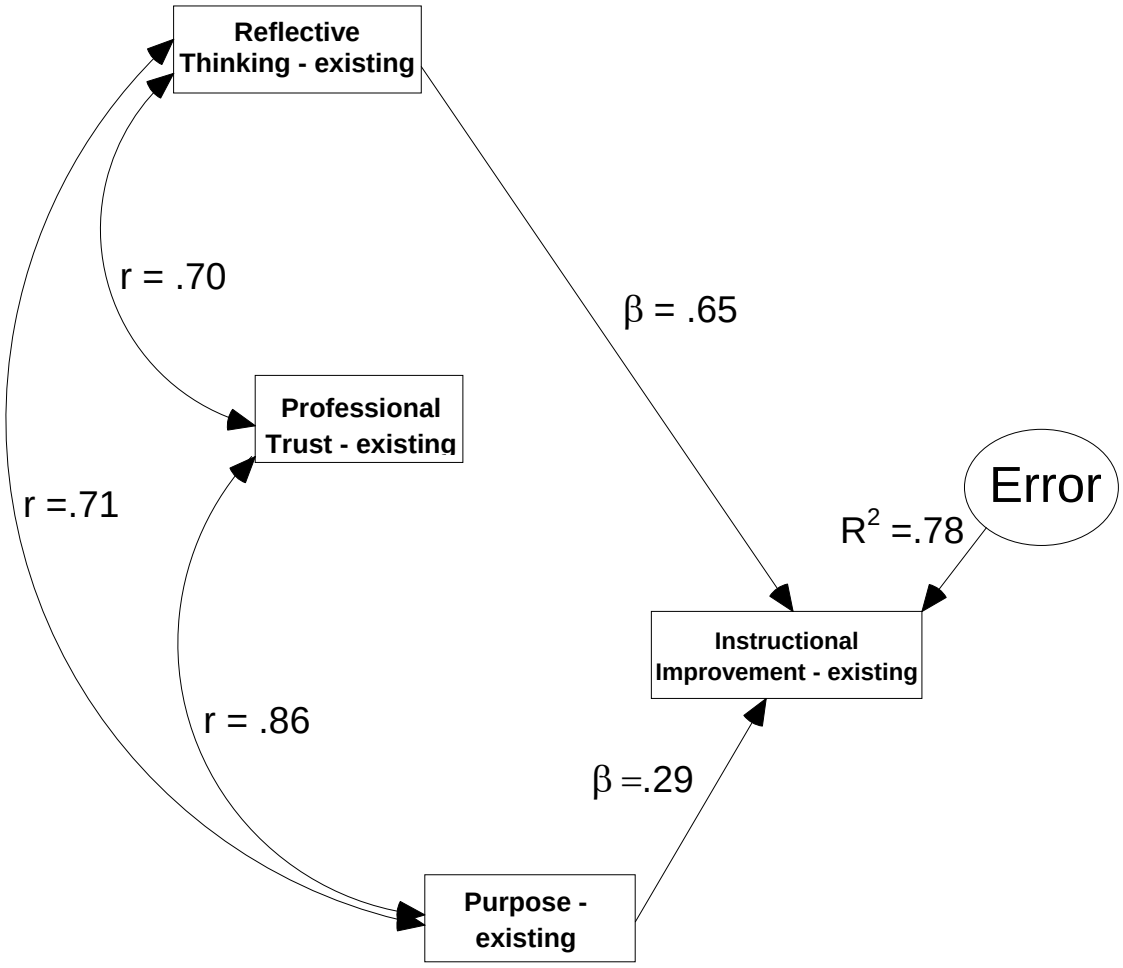


Figure 1 – Path Analysis Using "Exiting" Variables

Figure 1 shows existing variables. There was a strong relationship between purpose and trust (.86), followed by reflective thinking and purpose (.71) and reflective thinking and trust (.70). Single head arrows on Figure 1 indicate the major contributors (β) on instructional improvement are reflective thinking (β = .65) and purpose (β = .29). The $R^2$ of the multiple regression equation expressed that both variables accounted for 78% of instructional improvement. Please note that reflective thinking, which is a major contributor to instructional improvement, is highly correlated with professional trust and purpose.

Path Analysis – Using "Important" Variables

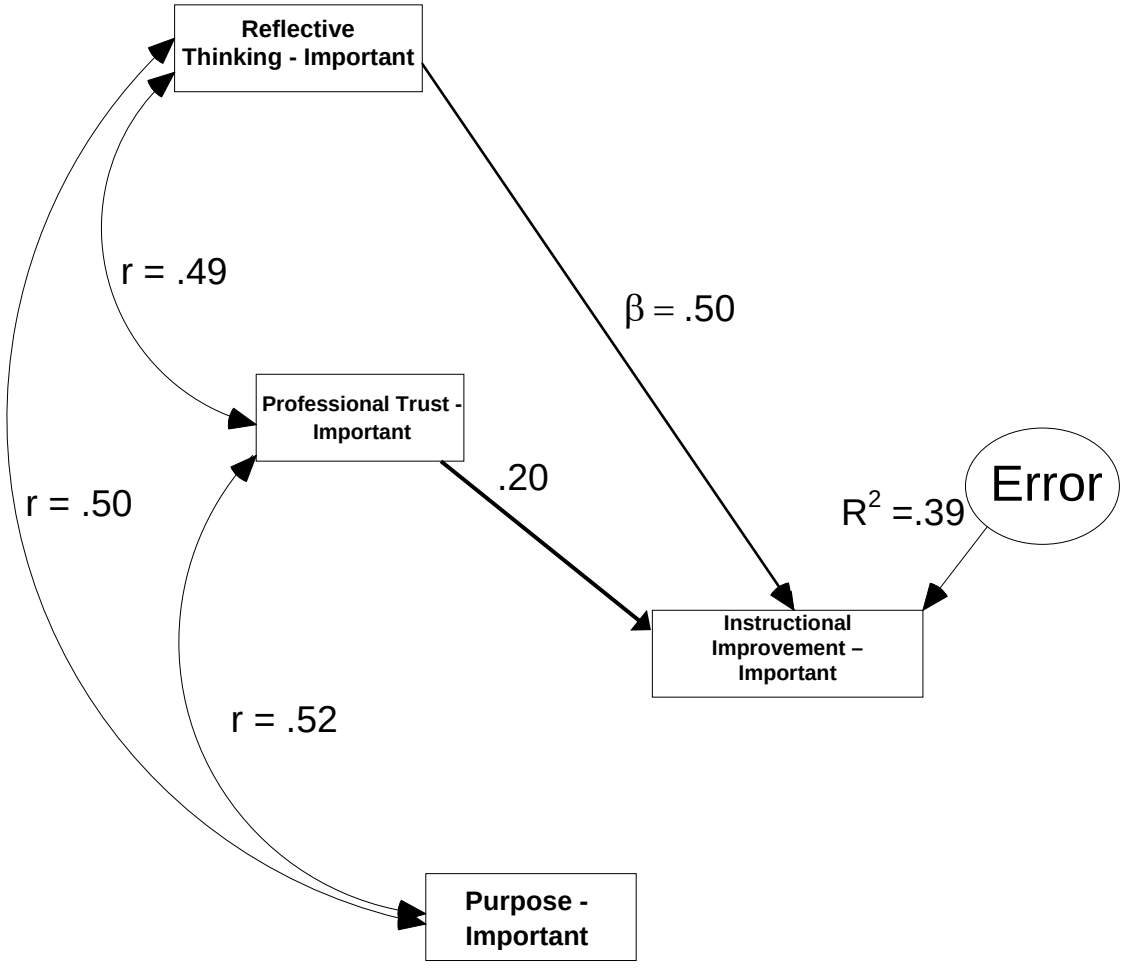


Figure 2 – Path Analysis Using "Importance" Variables

Figure 2 - There was a strong relationship between purpose (important) and professional trust (.52) followed by reflective thinking (important) and purpose (important) (.50) and reflective thinking and professional trust (.49). Single head arrows on Figure 2 indicate the major contributors (β) on instructional improvement are reflective thinking (β = .50) and professional trust (β = .20). The $R^2$ of the multiple regression equation expressed that both variables accounted for 39% of instructional improvement. Please note that reflective thinking, which is a major contributor to instructional improvement, exhibits a correlation with professional trust and purpose.

There was a relationship between purpose and professional trust (.52), followed by reflective thinking and purpose (.50) and reflective thinking and professional trust (.49). The relationship between reflective thinking and instructional improvement was still the greatest of the independent variables (.50). We can conclude that purpose and professional trust are both strongly related to reflective thinking. These are foundational to reflective thinking, which is the variable most responsible for instructional improvement. The $r^2$ was much weaker, at .39, which shows a lower degree of validity, as compared to the .78 using the 'existing' variables.

## Conclusion

We concluded that reflective thinking is of critical importance in the process of supervision of instruction. Reflective thinking was found to be the highest contributing factor in instructional improvement (existing and importance). According to Yinger, (1990) and McAlpine, (1999) the importance of reflection is essential to the interactive process of evaluation. We agree that reflection is imperative for the process of ongoing formative evaluations involving both the observer's and the teacher's thoughts and actions. Teachers must think critically and self assess their practices based on the feedback of those supervisors that are responsible for evaluating their instructional methodologies. While there has been much interest in teaching reflective thinking to students in the last decade, this process must begin with administrators and teachers in improving the supervision of instruction process, and applying reflective thinking skills to teaching methodologies.

Senge (2002) identified that reflective dialogue, unity of purpose, collective focus on student learning and collaboration are important in instructional improvement. In agreement with Senge, we found that purpose is the second major contributor to instructional improvement in existing practices. Interestingly enough, purpose did not show a relationship with instructional improvement ("importance"). Senge (2002) did not discuss what teachers believe to be important, so this information may provide additional insight for the literature review.

Covey (2004) illustrates the interconnectedness of high trust and levels of communication. He explains the synergistic position of high trust produces solutions better than any originally proposed, and all parties involved are consciously aware of it. Furthermore, they genuinely enjoy the creative enterprise. In order for the evaluation process to intrinsically have purpose and meaning, the level of trust between the evaluator and teacher must exist at high levels for professional growth.

If our nation's schools desire instructional improvement, then we conclude that the best way to achieve this is to foster reflective thinking of instructional supervision on the part of the faculty, in an environment where such supervision of instruction is filled with trust and purpose. Supervision of instruction is recognized by many educators as a vital component in the process of instructional improvement. A self-reflective practitioner is constantly thinking of new ways to insure professional growth and student achievement.

## Areas for Future Research

This study should be replicated in other school districts throughout the United States, particularly as the 2014 NCLB deadline rapidly approaches. A related area for future research is to examine the differences between teacher's perceptions, trust and reflections comparing and contrasting male and female administrators. This is especially significant as an increasing number of female superintendents, assistant superintendents and building-level principals enter the nation's public school systems. (Shakeshaft, 1989)

Other studies examining the importance of reflective thinking and its relationship to professional trust, purpose and instructional improvement need to be conducted and expanded upon. Other factors driving instructional improvement in highly successful schools need to be identified, so that this knowledge can be disseminated for the ultimate benefit of students throughout the nation and internationally.

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