

## Formal and Informal Evaluation Systems: Two Approaches to Teacher Supervision

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### Abstract

*Formal and informal systems of evaluation are commonly used by school divisions and districts to monitor teaching staff, measure teacher quality, inform staffing decisions, and plan professional development opportunities. Criticism from educators and supervisors of traditional and non-traditional evaluation systems has raised questions regarding the effectiveness of teacher evaluation in aiding teachers to improve their practices and achieve higher levels of professional growth. When implemented effectively, both formal and informal systems of evaluation have the capacity to support significant improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, and greater success is possible when the core components and guiding principles that form the foundation of the system are fully understood.*

The supervision and evaluation of teachers is a challenging and complicated process, but it is one of the most important aspects of supporting teacher learning and improving performance. Existing systems of supervision and evaluation have undergone extensive criticism and transformation in recent years, as attempts have been made to create more effective and productive evaluation processes (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Formal systems of evaluation are widely used by school divisions and districts to monitor the progress of their teachers, as well as to provide a sound tool for measuring the quality of teaching. The information gathered through these systems of evaluation is often used to inform decisions about staffing; however, it has been criticized for providing little direction in terms of how to improve the quality of teaching. Brandon School Division's (2002) Policy 5001, Supervision and Evaluation of Educators, addresses the processes and guiding principles of a formal system of evaluation. Alternatively, informal systems of teacher evaluation have begun emerging throughout school division and districts, as a means of addressing the perceived inadequacies of the more traditional, formal systems. Marshall's (2013) Mini-Observations scheme is one such informal system of teacher evaluation, aimed at addressing the discourse between how to effectively help teachers improve their practice, while also holding them accountable for their professional growth. In this paper, I will provide a description and comparison of Brandon School Division's (2002) formal system of evaluation and Marshall's (2013) informal Mini-Observations system, as well as an explanation of specific circumstances with which I believe each system has merit.

Brandon School Division (2002) believes in the importance of a formal system of supervision and evaluation of its educators, to ensure a high quality educational program for all of its students. The main objective of its supervision process, as stated in Policy 5001, is "the professional growth of staff resulting in improved instruction, better enabling students to achieve their fullest potential" (p. 1), and this ongoing process of supervision is to be achieved through summative reports of the educator's professional growth, as well as performance reviews completed by the school administrator. These summative reports are retained on the employee's personnel file, and are considered to inform decisions "related to placement, promotion, contract continuation and the giving of references" (p. 1). There are six guiding principles which govern this system of evaluation: the belief that professional growth "is a continuous and progressive process... guided by reflection, self-assessment and personal goal-setting" (p. 1); intrinsic motivation provides the incentive for professionals to pursue opportunities for their own growth; growth is achieved during the purposeful and collaborative construction of new knowledge; expectations of educators must be shared and discussed with them; accountable educators are responsible for upholding the set standards and are afforded opportunities and time for professional development; and continuous

growth must be supported by the system. This formal system of supervision also identifies eight key elements of exceptional and essential teaching, known as the “Standards of Excellence in Teaching” (p. 2), which guide teachers and administrators in developing growth plans and setting goals that are meaningful and relevant. A professional growth plan provides educators with “the potential to improve teaching in a constructive, trusting and supportive atmosphere of risk-taking and reflection” (Brandon School Division, 2003, p. 7), as well as providing the accountability required for the school division to monitor the progress and measure the quality of its teachers.

Brandon School Division’s (2002) policy for teacher supervision and evaluation has strengths as well as weaknesses, in terms of its ability to meet its primary objective of ensuring and maintaining the ongoing professional growth of its educators. One of the major strengths of this policy is its focus on reflection, self-assessment, and personal goal-setting. These self-regulating behaviours have been linked to positive increases in self-awareness and improvement, promoting the concept that change is driven by “a goal, and an awareness of where one currently is in order to assess the discrepancy between the two” (McConnell, 2010, “The Psychology Behind Self-Reflection,” para. 1). Another strength of this policy is the attention to the constructive social process of learning, identifying that “educators grow professionally by actively constructing new knowledge within a purposeful, supportive and collaborative atmosphere” (Brandon School Division, 2002, p. 2). This Vygotskian approach to learning aligns with what many educators know about best teaching practices; knowledge is co-constructed and learning is not simply the accumulation of new knowledge, it is the process of acquiring the new knowledge (Berkeley Graduate Division, 2016). The connection between the evaluation process and opportunities for professional development is another strength of this policy. A criticism of many formal evaluation policies is that evaluation is “rarely used to help teachers access professional development to address their unique learning needs” (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 5); however, Brandon School Division’s (2003) Professional Growth Process recognizes that educators have unique needs by providing them with the opportunity to pursue professional development goals that are meaningful and relevant to them, and are communicated in each teacher’s annual growth plan.

There are also weaknesses in Brandon School Division’s (2002) Supervision and Evaluation Policy. One weakness is the lack of clarity and consistency in its identified standards of quality teaching. Although this policy identifies eight standards and provides a list of descriptive elements for each, it does little to provide a clear explanation of what these standards might look like with evidence to assist an evaluator in providing an accurate and fair assessment of the teacher’s performance (Brandon School Division, 2003). Another weakness of this system is that the summative evaluation of a teacher is primarily based on the teacher’s self-assessment and the administrator’s observations, which are often provided at the end of the process. A teacher’s ability to create an effective learning environment, planning and assessment processes, and commitment to diversity are all factors; however, no consideration is given to the teacher’s actual instructional effectiveness or to the quality of student learning. Consideration is given to the teacher’s ability to work collegially; however, potentially valuable insight from coworkers is not included. The commendations and recommendations from the administrator are provided to the teacher at the end of the process, with little opportunity or expectation of continuous feedback or follow-up. The format for evaluations is also a weakness of this system, which places new and experienced teachers on a Growth Track, while teachers who are considered at risk or on probation are placed on a Focused Evaluation Track. While the differentiation of teachers’ needs is a strength, the mandatory timelines are not. Ample support is given to new and struggling teachers; however, teachers that are deemed to be competent are placed on a four-year rotational cycle. Little consideration is given to teachers in this group during a non-evaluation year, many of whom could benefit from the evaluation process.

Marshall (2013) believed that the traditional system of evaluation was flawed, and he sought to develop a system in which summative evaluation was only “the tip of the iceberg” (p. 44), with the bulk of the iceberg being continuous and meaningful supervision directed at improving teaching and learning. In this system, known as Mini-Observations, Marshall found that detailed

information could be gathered in a less formal atmosphere and on a more regular basis, immediate feedback could be given, and problems could be corrected in a non-evaluative way. This informal system of evaluation consists of twelve key components that focus on structural changes to the traditional system of observations, prompt and meaningful feedback, and strong organizational details that ensure the system's success. Marshall's system of evaluation makes it possible for all teachers to be observed several times throughout the year, which opens the door to conversations with teachers "about the teaching and learning that's going on in their classrooms [which] is the heart and soul of instructional leadership" (p. 68).

Strengths of Marshall's (2013) system are found in its twelve key components. One of its main strengths is the structural change from the traditional, high-stakes observations which typically are scheduled and occur once or twice in an evaluation year, to the frequent, unannounced observations proposed by Marshall. Unannounced visits allow observers to capture a more "accurate picture of how teachers are performing on a daily basis" (p. 58), and by spreading these frequent visits out over the course of the year, evaluators can gain a better sense of the teacher's overall performance, while recognizing essential early warnings of problems and appropriately tracking progress. Another strength of the Mini-Observations is the opportunity for continuous and meaningful feedback. Perceptive administrators engage in a brief, informal conversation with the teacher as soon as possible after the observation to provide an opportunity for the teacher to clarify aspects of the lesson, thoughtful feedback that propels the teacher forward by focusing on the essence of quality teaching and learning, and an exploration of questions for subsequent conversations. These conversations are essential because "without dialogue and active reflection on the teacher's part, it's much less likely that adult learning will take place" (p. 65). The unique opportunity to develop an enhanced school-wide perspective is another great strength of this system, as it contributes to the development of "situational awareness – having a finger on the pulse of the school's culture and climate" (p. 85). Administrators who frequently visit every classroom have a good understanding of what is going on in every classroom, and this facilitates an opportunity to strengthen effective teaching practices by enhancing collegiality and collaboration.

In addition to its strengths, Marshall's (2013) informal evaluation system also has its weaknesses, one of which is its lack of criteria for effective, quality teaching. Marshall identifies this weakness, indicating that the use of teacher evaluation rubrics "increases the power of mini-observations and is in turn enhanced by them" (p. 85); Marshall (2014) has since developed a set of rubrics to support this system. Marshall (2013) also credits a team curricular planning approach and quality use of interim assessments as other key contributors to the effectiveness of Mini-Observations. These strategies enhance the success of this system by addressing the instructional effectiveness of a thoughtful, collaborative planning approach and by putting an emphasis on higher student achievement. Another flaw worth mentioning is that the informal Mini-Observations may only be included in formal evaluations if an explicit agreement has been made with the union indicating that unannounced observations may be considered for evaluation purposes. If this agreement has been made, the benefits of this system increase by not only providing support to teachers as they reflect on their daily practice, but also by gathering useful information to inform teachers' summative evaluations. If this agreement has not been made, and the unannounced visits are considered to be non-evaluative, then a formal evaluation that is separate from the Mini-Observations is still required.

Brandon School Division's (2002) formal Supervision and Evaluation of Educators Policy shares some common traits with Marshall's (2013) informal Mini-Observations system, as well as some distinct differences. Figure 1 displays these similarities and differences.

Both of these formal and informal systems of evaluation have merit, and are considered to be appropriate methods of evaluation. Brandon School Division's (2002) formal process is an effective evaluative tool for promoting self-regulating behaviours that are linked to self-improvement; and as such, use of this system would be beneficial in an organization where

Figure 1. Similarities and Differences Between Brandon School Division's Formal System of Evaluation and Marshall's Informal System of Mini-Observations

<b>Similarities Between Systems</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The main goal of the system is to promote and support educator growth and development.</li> <li>• Teacher evaluation is executed by the school administrator, with input from the teacher; limited consideration is given to the quality of student learning or feedback from colleagues.</li> <li>• Value is placed on teacher reflection, self-assessment, and goal-setting.</li> <li>• Collaboration is identified as an important factor for both individual and school-wide improvement.</li> <li>• Improvement plans are created, implemented, and frequently reviewed for struggling teachers.</li> <li>• Lack of clear and defining teacher evaluation rubrics and proficiency rating scales decreases the effectiveness of the system.</li> </ul>	
<b>Differences Between Systems</b>	
<p><i>Brandon School Division's Formal System</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are placed on different evaluation plans, depending on their perceived level of competence.</li> <li>• Competent teachers are evaluated every four years; new teachers, twice in first year; at risk teachers, every three months; on probation teachers, each month.</li> <li>• Observations are primarily scheduled, typically last between 30-60 minutes, and often occur between one and three times within a short time frame.</li> <li>• Teachers are expected to complete annual growth plans, indicating their personal goals and planned professional development.</li> <li>• Standards of Excellence in Teaching identify key elements of exemplary teaching, but lack clear and consistent examples of proficiency.</li> <li>• Teacher input into the evaluation process occurs through the practice of formal, written reflection; teachers describe examples of how they meet the eight exemplary teaching standards.</li> <li>• Feedback is often delivered at the end of the formal process, and serves as an offering of commendations and recommendations for future development.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Marshall's Informal Mini-Observations System</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All teachers are on same evaluation plan; however, at risk teachers may be placed on a more formal improvement plan.</li> <li>• All teachers are evaluated every year.</li> <li>• Observations are unannounced, typically last between 10-15 minutes, and occur frequently (ten observations throughout the year).</li> <li>• Administrators make decisions on necessary professional development, based on the observed needs of the school as a whole, and school teams provide collegial support to one another, as directed by administration.</li> <li>• Administrators determine their own essential ingredients of exemplary teaching, often resulting in a lack of a shared vision with the staff.</li> <li>• Teacher input into the evaluation process occurs during the follow-up conversations between the teacher and administrator; teachers provide explanations and reflections which offer clarity and guide subsequent observations and conversations.</li> <li>• Feedback is provided after every observation, allowing for immediate support and follow-up.</li> </ul>

current self-regulating behaviours have been identified as minimally effective. This formal process is also effective in its ability to hold teachers accountable, through its mandatory, annual growth plans. All teachers are expected to identify their professional goals each year by reflecting on their individual needs, indicating professional development opportunities that align with their goals, and

providing a plan for the implementation of new learning into current teaching practice (Brandon School Division, 2003). The use of this system would be valuable in an organization where accountability is a concern. In addition, Brandon School Division's system of evaluation requires scheduled, formal observations: a requirement that suggests this system would be a suitable alternative for an organization that fails to recognize unannounced observations as an appropriate evaluative tool.

Marshall's (2013) informal system of Mini-Observations requires evaluators to observe every teacher each year, which allows for accurate monitoring and tracking of each teacher's ongoing development, as well as for more informed staffing decisions. Marshall's system would be effective for an organization that was supporting a large, evolving staff, as it enables the administrator to draw on the expertise within the building to support and improve the teaching and learning in other classrooms, gain an accurate sense of which teachers require a more immediate intervention, and inform decisions pertaining to the future employment of staff. Marshall's system also provides opportunities for teachers to receive frequent feedback, engage in reflective practices, and share in professional dialogue about teaching and learning practices. This system would support a stagnant organization that was concerned with its staff's lack of commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

It is clear that both formal and informal systems of evaluation have merit with regards to teacher supervision. When time is taken to fully understand and appreciate the foundational components of an evaluative system, and substantial effort is made to follow its guiding principles, significant improvements in teaching and learning can occur, which is the ultimate goal of all supervision and evaluation systems.

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## About the Author

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