

Part I

Opening a Window to School Improvement



Teaching needn't be exceptional to have a profound effect; continuous commonsense efforts to even roughly conform to effective practice and essential standards will make a life-changing difference for students across all socioeconomic levels.

—Mike Schmoker, *Results Now*

As we embark upon the quest to improve our schools, we begin with a look into the world of teaching. Here in the Era of Accountability, where standardized tests reign and the status of public education makes us groan in collective exasperation, opportunities abound. Piles of information sit within reach, pleading for us to put our knowledge into practice. Brain research reveals much about the way students learn and retain information. Innovations in pedagogy offer us multiple proven ways to deliver instruction to children. And principles of adult learning clarify for us the best way to teach our professionals in an ongoing, relevant manner. We know a lot about teaching—and we all know we can do better.

In Part I, we provide the backdrop for our model of Strength-Based School Improvement. Chapter 1 introduces our argument that schools can improve and establishes the overarching concept for achieving this by identifying teachers' strengths, maximizing teachers' potential, and building teachers' capacity. Chapter 2 discusses the critical partnership of the instructional coach and the building administrator and why it's necessary for them work together to guide each teacher on a path of continuous improvement.

Alisa's Approach

The concepts and power of teamwork and collaboration became very clear to me when I first assumed the role of literacy coach at Anderson Elementary. I was charged with working with the teachers of kindergarten and 1st and 2nd grades—a knowledgeable yet very diverse collection of educators.

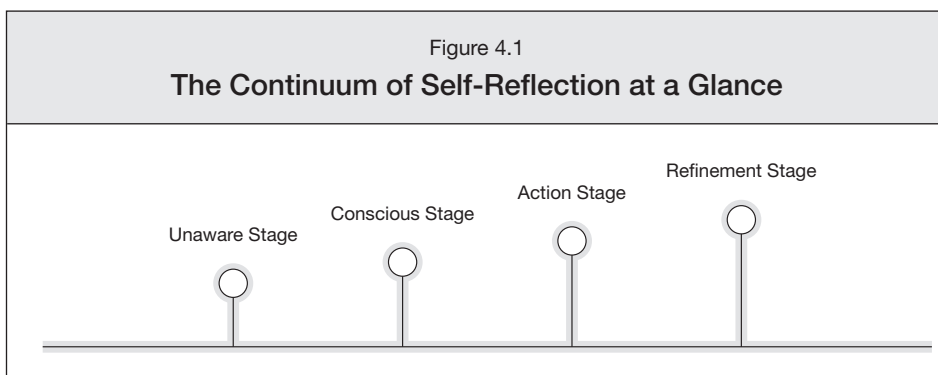
Almost immediately, I became aware of strained relationships within the group. Along with differing personalities and ranges in age and experience, there were stark disparities in teaching styles and classroom environments. Although the teachers met several times a month for a required PLC meeting, they had little awareness of the instruction taking place in their colleagues' classrooms. Lunchtime was a quiet affair. Some teachers gathered in one classroom, others paired up and ate separately, and still others opted to keep to themselves. Grade-pair meetings (at which all K–2 teachers convened) were often filled with tension: on one side, a few loud voices holding the floor; on the other, silent resentment. It was difficult to find trust or respect among the crowd, and positive, professional conversation was hard to come by.

For two years, I tackled the peculiarities of this group of educators with all the tricks I could dig out of my coaching toolbox. We set individual goals, we set team goals, we engaged in book clubs, we observed each other's classrooms, we researched areas of interest together, we analyzed data, we shared students in reading groups—it was an exhausting, demanding, trying time, but in the end it was well worth the efforts and trials, because in the process we had created a truly authentic professional learning community of primary grades teachers. Now, the entire K–2 staff eagerly congregates in one teacher's room three or four times a week for a shared lunchtime conversation. The conversation sometimes drifts to weekend plans or baseball scores, but more often it's a respectful debate (homogeneous grouping versus heterogeneous grouping) or an intense professional discussion (How can we better meet the needs of our English language learners?). And this is in *addition* to the planned weekly meetings and scheduled collaboration times!

What Is the Continuum of Self-Reflection?

Figure 4.1 shows the Continuum at a glance: four developmental stages through which teachers generally progress as they become skilled in the art of self-reflection. As the more detailed overview in Figure 4.2 illustrates, these phases denote gains in expertise, experience, motivation, knowledge, and most definitively, self-reflective abilities. Identifying what stage a teacher is in helps a coach determine that teacher's specific learning needs and create a successful coaching plan, built on the strategies outlined in the Continuum. This precise approach to on-site, embedded staff development can yield tremendous benefits as teachers become more aware, more confident, better motivated, more knowledgeable, and increasingly self-reflective.

When we refer to the stages of the Continuum of Self-Reflection, what we're talking about are states of mind, levels of self-awareness, and phases in the self-reflective process. We've chosen the term "stage" to emphasize that self-reflection is a progressive process. We do *not* mean to suggest a categorical definition of an individual's development. In fact, a teacher may demonstrate characteristics of more than one stage simultaneously and be in different stages while teaching different subjects or courses, for example. Our intent is for you to view the teacher characteristics and classroom characteristics associated with each stage more as reference points than as a comprehensive list of behaviors and attributes to be "checked off" before the teacher can "advance" to the next stage. Essentially, the Continuum is a tool to help school leaders understand a teacher's current state of mind and identify the approaches that will encourage deeper reflective habits.



reading, and ideas revolve around the concepts of instructional pedagogy and classroom decision making. They are interested in learning and implementing best practices in their classroom and are quite aware of the effect of evidence-based teaching on their students' learning.

Related Classroom Characteristics

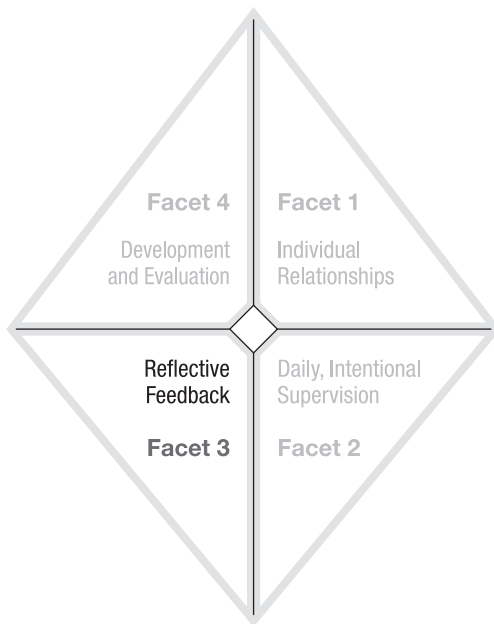
Observing the following characteristics in a teacher's classroom may provide further indication that the teacher is in the Action stage of the Continuum of Self-Reflection.

Assessment is regularly used to monitor student progress. Action-stage teachers want to know if their instructional approach is working and if their students are learning. They rely on frequent assessments, mostly formal tools, to monitor academic growth. After each assessment interval, they evaluate their instructional progress and attempt to make necessary changes in order to increase student achievement.

Best-practice instructional strategies are consistently applied. It is readily apparent that these teachers are making a sincere effort to do what is best for their students. Whether you notice a transformation in the classroom environment (more student-generated work, desk clusters for cooperative learning, etc.) or changes in specific instructional approaches (differentiated instruction, the use of active engagement strategies, etc.), once Action teachers have resolved to make changes toward improvement, you will see minimal relapse into old habits and ways.

Lessons are linked to standards. These teachers may not have "I can" statements posted each day in their room, objectives written on the board, or standards systematically recorded in their lesson plans, but they are aware of what needs to be taught and have an objective for each lesson. Classroom activities and assignments also point clearly to the stated learning targets. Action teachers make a concerted effort to link instruction with the standards they are responsible for teaching.

There is evidence of limited long-term planning. Action teachers have written long-term and daily plans for student learning that follow a logical and developmental sequence. The plans, however, are generally limited to individual subject areas and do not connect one context or subject area with



Reflective Feedback

Now that we have established that effective administrators are in classrooms as often as possible and have created a realistic plan for making this happen, it's time to focus on what we expect to occur during this time. What is the end result you, as an administrator, should be aiming for? What is the ultimate goal?

Clearly, you're interested in improving student achievement by increasing each teacher's capacity for success. The path that you are attempting to usher each teacher down, however, is not simply one of refined skills and improved strategies. Rather, this path is one of introspection, focused on the critical analysis of one's own teaching practices, decision making, and thinking processes. Administrators aim to guide each individual teacher along the Continuum of Self-Reflection, with the ultimate goal of encouraging long-term professional growth and continuous, accurate self-reflection.

From the administrator's point of view, conducting frequent rounds and walk-throughs is a terrific start. A step into the classroom is a huge step in the right direction. However, just getting into the classrooms on a regular basis won't accomplish that by itself, just as opening the hood of your car and looking inside won't make it run more smoothly. Improvement requires action. And what is the action you must take to make walk-throughs the effective professional growth tools they can be? You must provide reflective feedback.