Analyzing student work can help principals become more effective instructional coaches.

Gabrielle Nidus and Maya Sadder

It's Tuesday morning, and you meet with Ms. Long, one of the teachers on your staff, to talk about the observation of her lesson that you conducted yesterday. You chat amicably, she smiles, you tell her what you observed, and then you use the district’s guidelines for best instructional practice to identify a few areas she could work on. Together, you decide that she should focus on making the goals and objectives of the lesson more transparent to students, circulating through the classroom to check for understanding, and asking questions that elicit higher-order thinking. You complete your observation checklist, she signs her name, and you move on to the next teacher to repeat the process.

The following week, you revisit Ms. Long’s classroom. As she promised, she has written the goal and objectives of the lesson on the board, she circulates around the room, and she asks more challenging questions about the text. You're pleased with the teacher’s conscientious response to your suggestions. But you notice that students’ discussion comments are still vague, and you see no sign that students are achieving a deeper understanding of the text. You feel frustrated. This teacher is one of the easiest to work with, and she has followed through with your suggestions—but your coaching doesn’t seem to have had any effect on student learning.

Changing the Focus of Principal Coaching

As a principal, you’re often told that you are, first and foremost, an instructional leader. Not only must you manage the daily operations of the building and deal
with a host of other unforeseen challenges, but you’re also responsible for the academic progress of every student in the school. Even in those schools fortunate enough to have a curriculum coach, the principal must still set the expectations for student learning. To effectively sustain school improvement, the principal must be the epicenter of school change.

To fulfill this challenging role, many school leaders strive to create a community of educators who collaboratively reflect on and improve their practice with the principal’s support. This process can begin with formative coaching, an approach that uses student work as the foundation for mentoring and professional development. Formative coaching is built on deep analysis of teaching and learning—and on the assumption that the ultimate purpose of improving instructional practice is to improve student achievement.

The Formative Coaching Cycle
Formative data are all around you—on the school bulletin boards, in student notebooks, and in the classroom conversations you hear. Learning to use such data to inform your conversations with teachers—and teaching them how to reflect on student work themselves—will help you create a collaborative and reflective school community.

Coaching teachers with the formative cycle is a simple process you can include as part of teacher observations, informal coaching, grade-level meetings, or schoolwide professional development. Let’s consider how you might use the steps of this cycle to deepen the conversation following a classroom observation.

Step 1. Pre-observation
As principal, you arrange to observe your 4th grade reading teacher, Ms. Carter. During the pre-observation meeting, Ms. Carter explains that her learning goal is for students to use evidence to support their ideas during their book group meetings. You discuss such questions as, Have you based this learning goal on student need? Is it appropriate given the rigor of your state standards?

Next, you determine with Ms. Carter how she will assess student progress toward the goal. What type of formative coaching...
data might you both collect during the lesson to shed light on students’ learning? A form like the one in Figure 1 can facilitate the pre-observation step.

**Step 2. During the Lesson**

You arrive at Ms. Carter’s class at the arranged time. During the lesson, you observe and record student responses and write down techniques you see Ms. Carter using in her teaching.

For example, you note that during the introductory part of the lesson, she models how students might use sticky notes to mark important parts of the text that they want to include in their response. As you walk around during the group discussions, you notice students flipping through their books, using the sticky notes to locate passages that they have marked, and then reading them aloud to their group to support the points they make. One student explains that the main character in the novel she’s reading has become more open-minded, and she reads a selection she has chosen from her book to support this comment. When another student disagrees with this interpretation of the main character, the group asks him to support his ideas with evidence from the text. He flips to one of his sticky notes and reads aloud.

You make notes of what you hear. This information will be valuable later in the post-observation meeting. It can provide a context for your feedback about the teacher’s instruction.

**Step 3. Post-observation**

During this step, you dig into data with the teacher and provide feedback. Together, you and Ms. Carter review the notes you have taken about the student discussion (see fig. 2) and consider whether the lesson achieved its goal.

As you look through student responses, you notice that although students are using textual evidence, some students are merely quoting lines from the story that don’t provide adequate support for their ideas. Ms. Carter records the names of these students, and you discuss the kind of lessons that might help them. Ms. Carter decides that she needs to specifically teach students how to choose evidence that provides support for an idea. You encourage her to make a rubric to evaluate student responses for future lessons.

Figure 3 shows a form that you might use to facilitate the conversation. On the left side, you list the points observed that connect to the lesson goal. The right side details the next steps you and Ms. Carter discuss. This form enables you to follow up and monitor progress by looking at subsequent samples of student work.

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Taking the Conversation Schoolwide

Formative coaching enables principals to provide meaningful feedback to
Consider the Meaning of Data

As you shift your focus to collecting and analyzing schoolwide student data, it is important to determine what type of data you should explore. Richard Dufour explains that many schools suffer from the DRIP syndrome: “data rich and information poor.” Schools often don’t know what data are important, what data they should closely monitor, and what decisions they should make on the basis of the data.

Remember, the term data does not mean just test scores; it encompasses all the talk and work of teachers and students. Data may come from homework assignments, writing samples, portfolios, exit slips, journals, or any information that provides the opportunity to discuss student work in the context of the lesson and instruction.

During your one-on-one formative coaching meetings with teachers and your whole-school professional development times, notice what kinds of evidence teachers use to determine whether their lessons have achieved their stated goals. Here are some questions to consider with teachers:

- How do we talk about students’ learning? Do teachers just report test scores, or do they show you writing portfolios or point out the number of times a student raised his or her hand during the lesson?
- Do teachers systematically or regularly collect information on students? If so, how often do they collect it, and what do they do with it? Do they use it to communicate with parents and with next year’s teacher, or do they file it away?
- Are there areas in which teachers do not collect data? Why?
- How do teachers measure or track student progress? Do they use rubrics?
- What kinds of data are members of the larger school community (parents, students, counselors) aware of? How do they use this information?

Reflecting on these questions will help inform decisions about which areas of data collection your coaching and professional development should focus on.

Make Time to Look at Data

If there’s one thing all schools are short on, it’s time. That’s why you need to integrate reflection on student work throughout the school’s professional development activities. To enable staff to have more rich and meaningful conversations and to provide the opportunity and space for coaching, you might want to set up common grade-level planning periods in which teachers can examine student work. If you can’t attend every grade-level meeting, consider sending a monthly e-mail in which you share the formative coaching cycle you are using with teachers and talk about the instructional goals teachers are setting and the formative data they are collecting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the Observer Noticed</th>
<th>Next Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students used sticky notes during discussion.</td>
<td>Minilesson: What are the qualities of good textual evidence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students cited evidence that didn’t support their ideas.</td>
<td>Develop rubric on levels of support. Continue sticky note strategy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Build a Common Vocabulary**
As you examine student work with teachers, you may notice that the language teachers use to describe teaching, learning, and student progress varies from teacher to teacher. Ms. Gonzalez reports that students are on grade level; Ms. Thomas says her students read 90 words per minute; Mr. Neely says his students are reading at guided reading level E. Imagine a football team in which each player interpreted the quarterback’s signals differently. How could they work together if everyone had a different idea about what direction they were going in?

To develop a professional learning community that produces high student achievement, it’s important to establish common ground so that the 1st grade teacher can communicate aspects of student learning to the 2nd grade teacher and beyond. Creating a common language among teachers will also support you in your coaching role and provide a shared understanding of next steps when you give feedback or suggestions.

Consider this scenario, for example. After reading through a variety of writing samples with teachers during post-observation meetings, you are not satisfied with the quality of student writing across grade levels. You decide to have teachers bring a sample of exemplary essay writing at their grade level to an intermediate-grades planning meeting.

A conversation between Ms. Carter (4th grade teacher); Ms. Thomas (5th grade teacher); and Ms. Hannah (3rd grade teacher) ensues after they read a collection of 4th graders’ essays.

Ms. C: I think Brian’s essay is really good because he has a main idea and sticks to his topic.

Ms. T: That’s true, but he has many punctuation errors.

Ms. C: That doesn’t matter to me as much as the fact that Brian stayed on topic and had a good voice in his essay. That’s what I’ve been focusing on in class, so I’m happy to see that he got it.

Ms. H: That’s true. But shouldn’t we expect a 4th grader to use punctuation appropriately and stay on topic? Looking at my standards, I expect that my 3rd grade students can do both.

Ms. T: So then, how should a 4th or 5th grader’s essay writing look? Wouldn’t it be great if we could show students and parents examples of great writing at their grade level?

Ms. H: Maybe we could create a joint rubric that clarifies what we expect each grade level to know. That could help us analyze the writing that intermediate students are doing.

This conversation, although only the first of many, begins the process of developing a shared language around expectations for student work. As the principal, you will be able to base your coaching of individual teachers on these common expectations.

**Celebrating Progress**
A final but important benefit of formative coaching is that it enables teachers to identify and celebrate areas in which their students’ achievement has grown. Teachers may feel a renewed sense of efficacy when the schoolwide conversation focuses on ways to collectively improve student achievement. Thus, making systematic analysis of

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**10 Ways to Weave Student Work into the Fabric of Your School**

1. Focus on student work during your classroom observations and follow-up conversations.
2. Encourage teachers to create student work portfolios.
3. Talk with teachers about the student work they post on bulletin boards.
4. Use student work to inform meetings about student behavior plans or any teacher discussions of students who need social or behavior interventions.
5. Build in time for teachers to discuss student work in grade-level teams as well as across grade levels.
7. Always have teachers bring student work to professional development activities to serve as a basis for discussion.
8. Choose one kind of student work—for example, writing genres or graphic organizers—to focus on as a school community.
9. Display and discuss various kinds of data that teachers collect.
10. Encourage teachers to send student work folders to next year’s teacher.

*EL Online*  
For another example of how a principal or coach might structure conversations with teachers, read the online-only article “Mapping Productive Talk” by Jennifer Abrams at www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct11/vol69/num02/Mapping-Productive-Talk.aspx.
student work part of the fabric of your school not only helps you become a more effective instructional leader, but also helps your school become a more vital learning community.  

1DuFour, R. (2004). What is a “professional learning community”? Educational Leadership, 61(8), 6–11.

Gabrielle Nidus is a literacy coach for Early Reading First through the University of Illinois at Chicago; gabrielle@bshor.com. Maya Sadder is a principal in the Chicago Public School district; mayasadder@gmail.com. They are coauthors of The Literacy Coach’s Game Plan: Making Teacher Collaboration, Student Learning, and School Improvement a Reality (International Reading Association, 2009). For more information about formative coaching, see http://formativecoaching.com.

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