

Commentary

From Evaluation to Collaboration: Building Trust Through Coaching-Centered Practice

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Abstract

This reflective commentary examines the disconnect between traditional teacher evaluation systems and the need for equity-driven coaching practices that foster trust, growth, and instructional improvement. Through the lived experiences of a school administrator, student teacher, and university supervisor, this piece illustrates how evaluations rooted in procedural compliance often can be unsettling and undermine teacher confidence. This can be particularly true for early-career educators when emphasizing judgment over development. Evaluators, defined here as administrators, supervisors, and mentors, are called to develop from enforcers of accountability to facilitators of inclusive, relationship-based learning. Grounded in research and practice, this commentary integrates four frameworks: (1) The 5D Rubric; (2) Elena Aguilar's *Coaching for Equity*; (3) the Specificity and Objectivity Matrix; and (4) the Ladder of Inference—to demonstrate how evaluation systems can evolve into reflective, bias-aware, and culturally responsive coaching models. By enhancing the evaluation process as a coaching-centered practice, administrators

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and supervisors can foster relational trust, reduce affective filters, and build a reflective practice culture that ultimately benefits teachers and students.

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Introduction

Teacher evaluation is more than just a formal process; it's a critical part of every school system with high stakes for teachers and administrators alike. For teachers, especially those new to the profession, the evaluation process can be a defining moment, shaping their career path, opening doors for professional growth, or, in some cases, determining their future in the classroom. For administrators, the responsibility of evaluating teachers can feel overwhelming, as the process not only impacts instructional quality but can also strain relationships and trust between school leaders and their staff. How do we strengthen high-stakes teacher evaluations into collaborative coaching conversations to support continuous growth? How might we strengthen high-stakes teacher evaluations as opportunities for meaningful reflection, dialogue, and continuous professional growth? The following stories highlight two perspectives on this topic.

The Shameful Impact of Evaluations: A Teacher's Perspective

As a new student teacher with minimal experience in the K-12 world, I stood in front of the class, awaiting my first formal observation on a Wednesday afternoon. The clock displayed the time of 1:22 PM which was just eight minutes until my university supervisor arrived. I glanced over my lesson materials one last time to make sure everything was ready for my first graders, as my heart pounded. When my supervisor arrived, we exchanged quick and polite greetings before she settled into her seat, pen equipped in her hands. My cooperating teacher remained at her desk, filing through paperwork, occasionally glancing up towards my direction. I took a slow, deep breath and with a gulp, launched into my lesson on contractions.

As I began, things went relatively smoothly, but then, my nerves crept in. When reaching for my notes, my hands began to tremble. Suddenly, they slipped from my grasp and scattered across the floor in front of my students gathered on the carpet. I scrambled to collect them, heat rushing to my face. A contraction that had stumped my

students suddenly felt like a mountain I couldn't climb. I skipped it and kept going, but a knot had already formed in my stomach.

Though I had planned every moment carefully, my activity wrapped up faster than anticipated. Panic set in, what was I going to do now? I improvised, calling students back to the carpet. Just as I began to regain confidence, a student rolled across the floor and tore their worksheet in half. I froze for a moment, torn between redirecting the student and managing the time. I felt my supervisor's eyes on me that were evaluating harshly and judging.

Before even sitting down for the debriefing, I felt like a complete failure. My supervisor sighed and handed me a long, broad list of "areas for improvement." With each bullet point, I sank further into my seat. I had excelled throughout my credential program, received praise from my cooperating teacher, and built meaningful relationships with my students. But that one observation eclipsed all of it.

As I reflect on this experience now, I realize that my reaction when internalizing a single high-pressure evaluation as a measure of my worth is not uncommon. In her study on formative supervision, Dehombreux (2024) highlights how traditional evaluation models often conflate assessment with support, leaving teachers feeling scrutinized rather than guided. When evaluations are framed as summative judgments rather than opportunities for dialogue, they can undermine teacher confidence and inhibit growth. My own evaluation felt like an isolated event, lacking meaningful feedback or follow-up. This emphasizes the need to reframe evaluations through a coaching lens, one that centers reflection, relational trust, and ongoing development. When teachers experience evaluations as collaborative and supportive, they are more likely to engage with feedback authentically and view supervision as a pathway toward professional growth rather than punitive conversation.

This aligns with what Smith (2019) described as the "Scarlet Letter" effect of teacher evaluations where a single judgment can define a teacher's professional identity. Evaluation, in theory, should be about improvement, yet in practice, it often becomes a high-stakes labeling process that undermines confidence rather than building capacity. Smith's research shows that when evaluation is used as a compliance tool rather than a developmental one, it creates fear and discourages teachers from taking risks or seeking help. That's exactly how I felt, like one imperfect lesson erased all the skills and connections I had built.

According to Dehombreux's (2024) research, trusting relationships between teachers and supervisors can be developed through frequent, informal observations along with reflective conversations. I may have benefited from an ongoing dialogue instead of an outsider being

judged. My supervisor could have given me a safe space to help unpack my instructional choices with specific, actionable feedback in lieu of a broad list of deficiencies within my teaching.

Contemplating my first observation, I now see how a formative, trust-based approach to supervision could have transformed my experience, positively. What I needed was not just an evaluation but a collaborative conversation using a humanistic coaching style that recognized my strengths, helped me reflect on my challenges, and reassured me that growth is a process, not a single high-pressure moment.

Deadlines? But What About Improving Instruction? An Administrator's Perspective

I remember attending my first administrative training in the district. I had just been hired as an assistant principal at a high school and was eager to support teachers, especially when it came to instruction. After all, instruction is the most powerful lever for addressing students' needs in a school system, and I was excited to be part of that work.

Midway through the day, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources led a session on the district's teacher evaluation process. I was particularly looking forward to this session, assuming it would provide insights into how to effectively evaluate and support teachers in improving instruction.

Then came the handouts—a thick, 25-page section of the collective bargaining agreement, dense with legal and technical language outlining the evaluation process. It was an intimidating document, to say the least. Next, we received copies of the evaluation forms—a collection of rubrics, tables, and a space for notes. Finally, there was a detailed timeline for conducting evaluations, specifying steps for pre-observation meetings, formal observations, and post-observation conferences, all meticulously categorized by probationary and tenured teachers.

As I flipped through the pages, I found myself overwhelmed. *Two types of teachers to evaluate? Multiple deadlines to track?* I had expected guidance on fostering teacher growth, but instead, I was handed a rulebook.

The Assistant Superintendent walked us through the key contract language, the evaluation forms, and the procedural timelines. Then, after nearly 30 minutes of explanation, they emphasized, "If you remember one thing from this session, it's this: *Meet all evaluation deadlines. That's the most important thing!*"

I sat there, stunned. *Deadlines? But what about improving instruction?*

For many administrators, this is their introduction to instructional improvement through evaluation—a meeting focused on procedural compliance rather than meaningful teacher growth. While understanding contractual obligations is crucial to conducting fair evaluations, it is not the driving force behind instructional improvement in schools.

Discussions on teaching standards, gathering instructional evidence, conducting productive coaching sessions, and fostering safe spaces for authentic dialogue often take a back seat in district-led evaluation trainings. Instead, administrators are left to develop these skills independently—through personal study, mentorship, or external professional development.

In a study conducted with 36 principals across three states, principals experienced the evaluation process as a “bureaucratic chore” (Donaldson et al., 2024, p. 492). Additionally, principals focused more on the procedures of conducting an evaluation rather than a way to improve instruction (Donaldson et al., 2024).

If we truly want to elevate teaching and learning, we must reconsider how we train administrators and use the evaluation process as a lever to improve instruction.

Shifting the Perspective of Teacher Evaluation

These shared experiences from both teachers and administrators highlight a common challenge—the focus on procedural compliance often overshadows the need for meaningful, trust-based coaching conversations. Administrators, typically, navigate evaluation systems without appropriate training in instructional coaching while teachers, particularly new ones, experience evaluations as a high-stakes judgment rather than an opportunity for growth. This results in increased affective filters for both teachers and administrators.

Based on the stories, fundamental flaws are noticeable in teacher evaluations, they are seen as accountability tools and not a developmental and collaborative process. Instead of fostering reflective practice, many evaluation systems leave teachers feeling disempowered and administrators stuck in bureaucratic cycles. If evaluation is to genuinely enhance instructional quality, it must be reframed through research-based coaching frameworks.

The following section explores four key theoretical models that can help shift teacher evaluation from a compliance-based system to a coaching-centered one. These include:

- ◆ The Ladder of Inference (A Psychological Framework for Bias-Free Feedback)

- ◆ Collecting Classroom Evidence (Objectivity & Specificity Matrix)
- ◆ Coaching for Equity (Elena Aguilar's Model)
- ◆ The 5D Rubric for Teacher Evaluations

By embedding these frameworks into evaluation systems, schools can move away from punitive assessments and toward a culture of continuous learning.

Grounding Teacher Evaluation on Continuous Learning Practices

Formal Evaluation Forms: Ongoing Coaching

The terms “formal” and “evaluation” can be daunting for pre-service and in-service teachers. These are typically written or typed onto forms separated into various categories. Historically, these are meant to document teacher performance but miss to capture the complexities of true instructional effectiveness and practice. Smith (2019) critiques formal teacher evaluations as a high-stakes process that can create an atmosphere of fear rather than growth. When evaluation forms serve as one-time assessments of teacher competence rather than ongoing tools for coaching and growth, they risk reducing teacher performance to compliance-based metrics instead of offering meaningful instructional feedback.

Formal evaluations often emphasize the ratings over reflection, leaving teachers with minimal guidance on how to improve their instructional strategies to increase student performance. Dehombreux (2024) found that teachers in systems that relied solely on formal, summative evaluations lacked the trust needed to engage in honest professional development conversations. Evolving formative evaluation models that have feedback integrated into ongoing coaching cycles can create a bridge with a culture of continuous learning rather than isolated assessments. By using feedback that fosters improvement, equity-driven coaching, specific classroom evidence, and clear mental models, evaluators can more effectively support instructional growth.

A Mental Model: Ladder of Inference

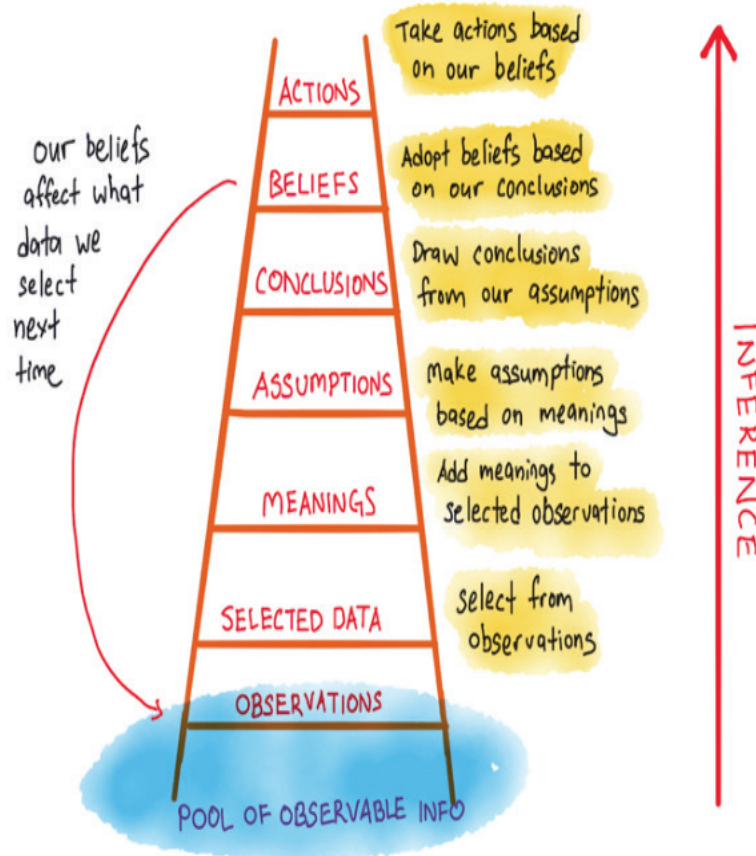
The Ladder of Inference, originally developed by Chris Argyris, was adapted by Chin (2020) to illustrate how assumptions can distort feedback. This explains how individuals move from observing data to taking action and drawing conclusions. See Figure 1. This often occurs without the realization of their cognitive biases. During the observation process, both evaluators and teachers can climb this ladder too quickly that leads to assumptions distorting feedback and perceptions of

performance. Smith (2019) describes how teachers who have negative evaluation experiences often internalize the feedback, even when it is based on a single observation. This can lead to self-doubt and reduced willingness to take instructional risks. When training evaluators and teachers to use the Ladder of Inference, it can help establish a more reflective and self-aware evaluation process.

This is meant to shift away from jumping to conclusions and stating, “This teacher struggles with student engagement.” Evaluators can instead take a moment to pause and examine their own assumptions. These particular questions can reinforce dialogue:

Figure 1

The Ladder of Inference: Steps in How Individuals Move from Data to Action



Note. Adapted from *Clearer communication: How to use the ladder of inference when communicating data to your business users*, by C. Chin (2020), © 2020 Holistics.

- ◆ What specific evidence supports this conclusion?
- ◆ What alternative explanations exist for the observed behavior?
- ◆ What clarifying questions could we ask before making a judgment?

This model can generate a growth-oriented and non-judgemental evaluation process using collaborative coaching practices. The affective filter that was once significantly high for both teachers and administrators are reduced.

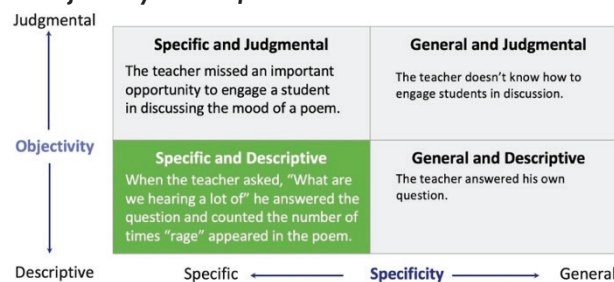
Moving from Subjectivity to Objectivity

A disputable facet of teacher evaluation is the way classroom observations are conducted and interpreted. Observations can be highly subjective without clarity within the protocols that can lead to biased and inconsistent feedback. This is where structured evidence collection models become crucial.

Dehombreux (2024) found that frequent, low-stakes observations, paired with reflective coaching, resulted in higher teacher engagement and professional growth compared to traditional summative evaluations. However, the feedback given must be grounded in objective evidence and not personal evaluator perceptions.

The Specificity & Objectivity Matrix framework assists in documenting observable classroom behaviors without judgment or bias (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2013). This tool ensures that feedback is rooted in objective evidence rather than evaluator perception, this can shift from subjective assessment to evidence-based coaching. See Figure 2 for the matrix and examples.

Figure 2
Specificity and Objectivity Matrix for Observation-Based Feedback



Note. Adapted from *Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide*, by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, p. 18. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/learning-walkthrough-implementation-guide/download>. © 2013 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Key strategies include:

- ◆ The use of descriptive rather than evaluative language in observation reports.
- ◆ Recording specific instructional moments rather than summarizing general impressions.
- ◆ Providing neutral evidence that teachers can analyze and reflect upon.

Instead of a top-down assessment approach, this actionable plan moves closer to a learning partnership between the evaluator and teachers.

Transformative Conversations

Elena Aguilar's Coaching for Equity model is pivotal to shifting evaluations from punitive assessments to transformative and collaborative learning conversations for educators. Aguilar (2020) emphasizes that coaching must go beyond technical aspects of instruction and address teachers' mindsets, emotional resilience, and commitment to equity within their classrooms. There is a need to embrace teachers' levels of competencies as an educator for their classrooms. When using a humanistic approach, admin and supervisors can create psychological safety and trust to allow teachers to engage in deep professional reflection to improve the educational experiences of students.

Aguilar (2020) identifies three elements for effective, equity-centered coaching:

1. *Active Listening & Inquiry*: Encourages reflective questioning rather than prescriptive feedback.
2. *Trust & Relationship Building*: Creates a safe space for teachers to share challenges without the fear of consequences from an observer.
3. *Equity-Centered Coaching*: Addresses the implicit biases in teaching practices and ensures the evaluation process does not disproportionately penalize marginalized teachers.

Using Aguilar's model within teacher evaluations, it alters the focus from compliance to transformation to allow feedback to support teachers' instructional improvement and professional well-being.

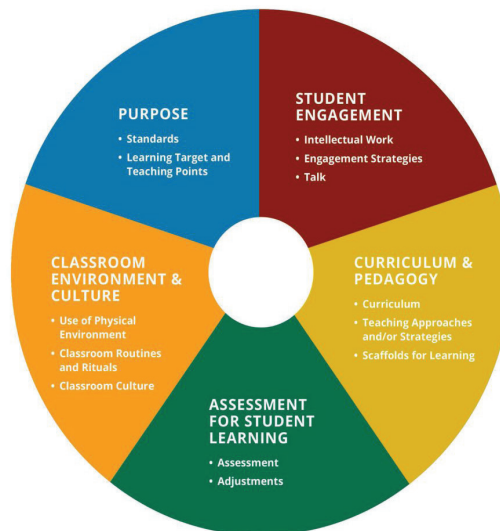
Using Growth-Oriented Feedback: Reflective Practitioners

The 5 Dimensions (5D) Rubric for Teacher Evaluations provides a structured framework for assessing instructional quality while promoting growth-oriented feedback. This contains 5 components:

instructional purpose, student engagement, curriculum and pedagogy, assessment for student learning, and classroom environment and culture. It is imperative to not utilize this as a simple checklist to maintain compliance. Research suggests that when evaluation systems incorporate coaching, teachers view observations as opportunities for reflection and professional development rather than high-stakes judgment (Dehombreux, 2024). Figure 3 developed by the (Center for Educational Leadership [CEL], 2020), illustrates how these five dimensions are interconnected and collectively inform a holistic approach to teacher development.

However, traditional implementation of the 5D Rubric often focuses on meeting procedural requirements rather than enhancing instructional practice. There is a lack of coaching which in turn creates this to become yet another bureaucratic tool rather than one for teacher growth. Dehombreux (2024) found that frequent, formative observations, followed by reflective conversations, were more impactful on teacher development than high-stakes formal evaluations. To fully leverage the 5D model, administrators and supervisors must move beyond static ratings and instead engage teachers in coaching

Figure 3
The 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning Framework



Note. Adapted from *The 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning™*, by Center for Educational Leadership, 2020. <https://k-12leadership.org/resources/5d-instructional-framework>. © 2020 Center for Educational Leadership.

conversations that promote reflective practitioners and ongoing improvement.

Bringing It All Together: A Coaching-Based Evaluation System

How can practitioners integrate these new insights to enhance teacher evaluation with a coaching-centered approach while maintaining the integrity of the process? We share the experiences of two educators actively building trust and capacity as they apply these frameworks within their disciplines.

Building Trust Through Coaching-Centered Evaluation

In order to have an effective coaching relationship, one must humanize themselves and build a foundation of trust. Supervisors may struggle with offering reflective support and teachers are unlikely to meaningfully engage with feedback in the absence of trust. According to Tennenbaum's (2018) study, relational trust in education is grounded in four interrelated components: *respect*, *personal regard*, *competence* in core responsibilities, and personal *integrity*. Embedding these "faces of trust" into the evaluation process promotes open dialogue and reduces the affective filter for both teachers and administrators (Tennenbaum, 2018). To engage in equity-driven and evidence-based feedback, it is recommended to build on relational trust, set clear expectations, and develop the capacity for supervisors.

After several years in the classroom, I transitioned into higher education as a faculty member in a teacher education program. Alongside teaching courses, I also work as a university supervisor, supporting student teachers during their clinical practice. In this role, I've embraced a coaching-centered approach to evaluation, one that is grounded in relationship-building, reflection, and support.

From the outset, I prioritize meeting student teachers and their cooperating teachers in person. This initial connection is key to humanizing the experience and framing the reflective process as collaborative rather than evaluative. I displayed my own *competency* by setting clear expectations on what feedback will look and feel like, reinforcing that it is non-punitive and formative. I remain committed to this because clinical practice is often as emotionally demanding as it is intellectually rigorous. By investing in relational capital early on, I create the conditions for honest dialogue and meaningful growth. I am displaying *personal regard* by intentionally making the space for the emotional realities of teaching. I want to treat my student teachers as whole people, not just as practitioners that I need to evaluate. This

humanizing approach helps them feel seen and supported, even during challenging moments.

I recall one observation in a 6th grade classroom where a student teacher's nerves became visible as students grew distracted and resistant. As the lesson progressed, his affective filter rose, and by the time he handed responsibilities back to his cooperating teacher, their body language reflected discouragement and defeat. When the student teacher sat down, I smiled warmly and asked, "How do you think the lesson went today?"

Immediately, he began harshly criticizing his performance. I gently interrupted and said, "Let's take a step back and take a deep breath. I want to remind you that I'm here to reflect with you and grow together." The integrity I showed is my promise to follow through with my teachers by approaching the conversation with empathy and transparency, reinforcing that my presence was about support, not surveillance. This created a sense of psychological safety along with consistency between my words and actions.

I pointed out a specific moment during the lesson when he successfully engaged a typically unfocused student using intentional supports. This reframing surprised him, he hadn't expected affirmation. As the student teacher shared the effort they had put into building that relationship, I saw their posture shift and energy lift. He began to recognize and take pride in the positive aspects of his teaching. Through respect, I highlighted and validated his strengths within the lesson and demonstrated his perspectives and expertise, even as a novice teacher. This helped level the power dynamic with mutual acknowledgment to create space for authentic reflection.

Once a safe, nonjudgmental space was established, we explored areas for growth. Through our conversation, I also learned about external factors impacting their students' engagement which was information that helped us co-construct realistic, developmentally appropriate goals for the classroom. Through a shared sense of purpose rooted in respect, trust, and mutual understanding, the goal setting process became a collaborative act rather than a top-down directive one.

Because we had built trust, the student teacher was more present and receptive to these next steps. I also took time to acknowledge the emotional toll of student teaching and offered simple, sustainable strategies for self-care. The personal regard was vital here as I recognized their emotional state and that their well-being mattered. I offered support beyond pedagogy and used relational care to help them feel more grounded and capable of moving forward.

As we wrapped up, the student teacher expressed gratitude for my

patience and understanding. I left the conversation feeling a deeper connection and a renewed sense of purpose. My own student teaching experience lacked this kind of supportive mentorship, which is why I now lean into a coaching style rooted in humanity and care.

Many evaluation-related tensions arise from misaligned or unclear expectations. Both supervisors and teachers benefit from a co-constructed understanding of what quality teaching looks like and how growth is supported. I truly believe that when we model clear expectations, normalize co-reflection, and prioritize relationships, we foster a culture of growth, not perfection. Evaluators can be both nurturing and knowledgeable while staying grounded in research-based practices and modeling effective, compassionate supervision. This reinforces my own competencies and instructional credibility as a mentor with a deepening impact. When evaluators model transparency and clarity, they are setting the tone for a culture that values reflection and growth over perfection.

Building Capacity for Coaching-Centered Evaluation

After a decade of leading at the school and district levels, I now have the privilege of serving as a faculty member in a graduate-level educational leadership program, where I help prepare the next generation of school leaders. In one of the courses I teach, *School Personnel & Finance*, one of our objectives is to review the teacher evaluation process. However, I've learned that simply reviewing the process is not enough if we want to truly build leadership capacity and move the needle forward on effective teacher evaluation.

That's why I intentionally go beyond the technical steps and focus on the human side of evaluation—the skills of collecting meaningful evidence, engaging in low-judgment dialogue, and using thoughtful questioning techniques.

For example, early in the course, I ask my students to watch a classroom lesson and take notes on what they observe. Once they finish, I introduce the specificity matrix and have them categorize the notes they collected. It's always eye-opening for them to realize that much of what they initially captured is vague, evaluative, or rooted in assumption. This is where I introduce the concept of the *ladder of inference*—how quickly we climb from observation to assumption to judgment without even realizing it. I remind them that while this instinct serves us in survival, it does not serve us in teacher evaluation.

After this realization, we revisit the practice. Students watch another classroom video, this time applying the specificity matrix

and consciously working to capture objective, specific evidence. The difference in the quality of their notes is striking—not only to me, but to them. They immediately recognize how much more useful, clear, and supportive their feedback would be to a teacher based on their second attempt.

In addition to evidence collection, I emphasize the power of listening, inquiry, and compassion in evaluation conversations. To help set the foundation for coaching conversations, I provide my students with selected readings from Elena Aguilar's *Coaching for Equity*. Together, we debrief what they've read and discuss how Aguilar's strategies can be applied to engage in authentic, equity-centered dialogue with teachers. These conversations help students recognize that teacher evaluation is not merely about compliance—it's about fostering growth, building trust, and promoting a commitment to equity.

I then provide opportunities for students to practice the teacher evaluation element of a pre-observation meeting with one another, learning how to apply a coaching conversation approach. During these practice sessions, students begin by asking their partner (the role-playing teacher) about the teaching standards they would like to focus on during the observation and identifying specific areas of strength and growth where they would like feedback. After each round of practice, I invite students to reflect on the experience. Without fail, they share how valuable the exercise was and how it shifted their thinking. More importantly, they recognize the adjustments they will need to make when facilitating real pre-observation conversations with teachers.

What I've learned about building capacity is this: If we want administrators to be effective evaluators who support teacher growth, we must ensure the practice is clear, intentional, and authentic. We can't just talk about evaluation; we must give future leaders the opportunity to experience it, reflect on it, and internalize it. Professional development on teacher evaluation should focus on recognizing our assumptions in observations, gathering specific and objective evidence, and strengthening coaching competencies such as active listening, open-ended questioning, paraphrasing, and reflective prompting (Aguilar, 2020). Capacity isn't built by checking boxes; it's built by creating space for learning, unlearning, and applying skills that make a meaningful difference for teachers and students.

Conclusion: Toward a Culture of Growth and Partnership

The two evaluators' experiences reflect the very real disconnect between the *intended purpose* of teacher evaluation and the *lived*

experience of those within the system. When evaluation is seen as a procedural chore or a performance trial, it fails to serve its most critical function: supporting instructional growth for student learning.

However, the research and models explored in this commentary offer a roadmap forward. The 5D Rubric, when embedded within coaching conversations, can drive reflective practice. Aguilar's *Coaching for Equity* model reminds us that emotional resilience and equity are inseparable from teacher development. The Specificity and Objectivity Matrix grounds feedback in neutral, observable data, and the Ladder of Inference invites both evaluators and teachers to slow down, reflect, and grow thoughtfully.

Above all, trust must be the foundation. Without it, even the best frameworks fall flat.

We offer models of how practitioners are building trust and capacity through these frameworks, shifting the teacher evaluation process from a compliance-driven model to a more human-centered, coaching-focused approach.

Evaluations as a human-centered, research-informed, coaching-based process, school systems can reduce anxiety, increase professional learning, and ultimately create environments where teachers thrive, students benefit, and administrators lead with purpose. Our aim is not to soften standards or create a new staff evaluation system. The goal is to create a culture of partnership through trust, clarity, and community building.

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