TWO SIDES
of the
COIN

EVALUATION AND SUPPORT WORK TOGETHER TO STRENGTHEN TEACHING

By Jane Kise

O n your first day of teaching, did each student listen to your every word? Did their work show mastery of the learning goals you'd set? Or did you, like me, glance through papers thinking, *How could my instruction possibly have prompted these essays?* Then again, perhaps the work quality wasn't as big a first-day concern as classroom management, the quiet little boy who would not participate, or how

THE POLARITY APPROACH TO CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION (PACT)

THE PACT MODEL INCLUDES FIVE STEPS:

1	2	3	4	5
SEE IT (a polarity). Recognize when "either/or" thinking is perpetuating a vicious cycle and move to "and" thinking. We have a polarity to leverage, not a problem to solve. Four questions help analyze this: • Is it ongoing, like breathing? • Are the alternatives interdependent, like inhaling and exhaling? • Over time, are both poles or solutions needed? • Finally, if we focus on only one upside, will we eventually undermine our mutual goal?	**MAP IT.** Take time to map the values and fears of each pole, identify a mutual goal, such as effective teachers, and acknowledge a deeper fear that has kept us rooted in our own position.	**ASSESS IT.** Stakeholders can measure or think through where an individual, team, or organization is on a particular polarity. Which pole is being honored more? Is the polarity in a virtuous or vicious cycle?	**LEARNING.** Consider our current circumstances, what they tell us about present and past actions, and how we might move forward, asking questions such as: How well are we handling this polarity? How might we improve?	**LEVERAGING.** Channel the energy being wasted on either/or thinking into identifying early warning signs that a polarity is getting out of balance and action steps that can harness the essential truths of both sides.

you'd cover the entire curriculum.

Like any profession or talent, mastering teaching takes thousands of hours of deliberate practice (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). Here, "deliberate" means having a coach or mentor to provide feedback on key skills and strategies for practicing to develop them.

If this is true — that mastering the practices of great teaching takes years — then how can we rate teachers ineffective as they first enter a classroom or even when master teachers are developing new skills? Rating systems need to consider this very real trajectory of growth.

Yet many of the evaluation systems being adopted across the country (and in other countries) are ranking teachers from highly effective to ineffective and, in some cases, using the rankings to begin termination. How did this happen? Because the difficulties being experienced in evaluating teachers were viewed as a problem to solve instead of a system of interdependent values — a polarity.

WHAT ARE POLARITIES?

Polarities are paradoxes, or tensions, or both/and rather than either/or thinking. Measurement for teacher evaluation *and* measurement for supporting teacher growth are two distinct value sets that together form an interdependent pair where each set holds a portion of the truth.

One value set by itself is incomplete without the other. Barry Johnson coined the term "polarity" as he developed organizational tools for working with these ongoing dilemmas. "Polarities are interdependent pairs that can support each other in pursuit of a common purpose. They can also undermine each other if seen as an either/or problem to solve. Polarities at their essence are unavoidable, unsolvable, unstoppable, and indestructible. Most importantly, they can be leveraged for a greater good" (Johnson, 2012, p. 4).

Any time you treat a polarity as if it were a problem to solve, you get the downside of each pole — exactly as is happening right now in many places with the new teacher evaluation models.

Threats of teacher strikes over evaluation systems, educator-driven cheating on standardized tests, a decrease in funds available for coaching, and a significant increase in teachers planning to leave the profession indicate that we're experiencing a vicious, not virtuous, cycle. A few years ago, one could have said we were in a vicious cycle because of the overfocus on supporting teachers.

Leveraging the wisdom of each pole could move toward the goal that the sides have in common: effective teachers in every classroom. Stakeholders need to recognize the valuable

contributions of the other position. Let's look at what might happen during a gathering of minds on this issue.

SEEING A POLARITY

To create this imaginary meeting of minds, I reviewed extensively the research, blogs, position papers, and websites of people and organizations on both sides of this issue, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Learning Forward, researchers at Harvard and Stanford, teacher unions and politicians, and many other sources.

In such a meeting, we would first demonstrate that teacher evaluation involves a polarity. A simple analogy — inhaling and exhaling — illustrates key points. Try it. Take a deep breath, hold it for as long as you can, and then breathe out. Then ask yourself: Which is better, inhaling or exhaling?

Whenever I have groups do this, someone always says, "Exhaling is better." Really? You can't exhale without inhaling. And, if you don't cycle through both processes, your body will shut down. That's the nature of a polarity.

Just as when you hold your breath, exhaling is seen as a solution, so years of an overfocus by the teaching profession on supporting teachers resulted in measuring teacher effectiveness being seen as a solution to problems within our education system. Seeing a polarity involves considering a few key questions:

- **Is the dilemma ongoing?** Are the poles interdependent? If we believe that teaching expertise develops over time — and can always be deepened — then evaluating where we are and planning for growth is an ongoing cycle.
- **Will overfocus on either pole undermine our purpose of great teachers in every classroom?** Yes, the downside of supporting teachers became a system where nearly all were rated highly effective; removing those who weren't was far too difficult. However, we are already seeing the downside of the new emphasis on teacher evaluation with a major increase in the percentage of teachers who plan to leave the profession soon (MetLife, 2012).

Seeing a polarity is the first of five steps in a process called the Polarity Approach to Continuity and Transformation (PACT). The PACT process is designed to help people with opposing views listen to and learn from each other, recognize each other's values and fears, understand the processes and incidents or policies that brought them to the current state, and determine what mutually agreeable action steps will lead them together toward a mutual purpose. The five steps are outlined in the table on p. 25.

MAPPING VALUES AND FEARS

Once we recognize that we're working with a polarity rather than a solvable problem, the next step is mapping — hearing and understanding the values and fears of each side.

Picture dividing the room into four quadrants, with each section representing the upside or downside of a pole, and a flip chart easel in each quadrant. Individuals walk to each quadrant, reading and adding items to each of the charts.

Ideally, each stakeholder spends time articulating the values held by each pole (the upside) as well as the fears. The table on p. 27 summarizes the widely documented values and fears of each pole.

Can you see how the negative effects of overfocus on the left pole (lower left quadrant in the table) led to the upper right quadrant being seen as a solution? And how we're already seeing the downside of the right pole because the left pole is being ignored?

The pendulum swings will continue without honest conversations about values and fears. In fact, research into how we form our positions and opinions reveals the impact of confirmation bias — the tendency to only pay attention to information that reinforces the position we already hold. The only truly effective method for overcoming these biases is to enter into deep dialogue with those who believe differently (Haidt, 2012). This mapping process provides such an opportunity.

However, the real power of polarity thinking comes from careful consideration of where the system is right now, how it got there, and what actions can help us get the upside rather than the downside of each pole.

ASSESSING WHERE WE ARE

The next step is assessing, formally or informally, whether we're seeing the upside of each pole. Within each school, district, or state, difficulties and solutions will be slightly different. We can informally assess where we are by considering which quadrant best describes the current energy flow in the system. Or we can use a formal assessment, using results to form the right action steps and put energy into the right practices to leverage the polarity.

Here's an example. A large school district, well into its first year of using its new teacher evaluation system, agreed to administer such a survey to instructional coaches, teacher evaluators, and curriculum coordinators.

The survey process developed by Polarity Partnerships gives an overall rating, a rating for how well the values and fears of each pole are being addressed, and ratings on individual questions. One can also compare different demographic groups.

We knew immediately that interest and concerns were high, since over 60% of those who were sent the survey link not only responded within 48 hours but also wrote lengthy answers to the open-ended questions and comment on the survey items.

The survey included 12 questions, evenly divided to gather information on how well the values and fears of each pole were being addressed. Respondents were asked to rate how often they see and experience items such as the following, with their responses ranging from "always" to "almost never":
- Our systems have appropriate pathways for removing ineffective teachers.

VALUES AND FEARS IN THE DEBATE OVER CREATING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

✚ Positive results of focusing on teacher support systems	✚ Positive results of focusing on teacher accountability
• Mastering the complex domain of teaching takes four to six years — and there are always new methods, skills, and knowledge to acquire. • An apprenticeship model, where teachers receive meaningful feedback and differentiated professional development, and an emphasis on career-long professional development, where every educator receives feedback and support to continue growing, would ensure teacher excellence. • This emphasis encourages the collaborative atmosphere that leads to student achievement.	• Other professions such as law and medicine have clear professional standards and hold members accountable. • In teaching, not only are standards nonexistent, but also 99.5% of teachers are rated effective. That's not credible in any profession. • A reliable measurement system will let us identify great teachers, reward them, and leverage what they know to help other teachers. • Further, a fair, legally defensible system will give school leaders more control over who is in the classroom.
▬ Negative results of overfocus on support to the neglect of accountability	▬ Negative results of overfocus on accountability to the neglect of support
• Current systems rank nearly all teachers as effective — and even teachers agree that it's almost impossible to remove ineffective colleagues. • Without professional standards, where is the incentive for ongoing growth? • Why aren't teachers held accountable for developing the practices proven to increase student achievement? • The tenure system takes away any incentive to improve, and the result is ineffective teaching.	• What can be measured is not always what is important. • The checklists being used to evaluate teachers cause a decrease in teacher creativity, devalue the professional wisdom developed through experience, and result in more teaching to the tests. • We're focused on removing teachers rather than on developing excellence. The result? Demoralization and erosion of trust among teachers, administrators, politicians, and the community.

• Measures of student motivation enable us to identify teachers that need support.

• Concerns over accountability testing result in teachers teaching to the test.

• Resources and requirements for teacher professional development are unclear.

Given the newness of the evaluation system, it was no surprise to see an overall score indicating that work is needed to leverage the evaluation and support sides of this polarity.

Analyzing how different stakeholder groups answered questions pointed to specific difficulties. For example, whereas the evaluators said, "Our method for identifying which teachers need developing is seldom ineffective," coaches gave a rating of "often" to the same item.

Further, coaches indicated that concerns over accountability testing were causing teaching to the test, but evaluators rated this as "sometimes." In contrast, both groups felt that the new professional development options were motivating teachers to improve practice.

THE LAST STEPS: LEARNING AND LEVERAGING

The assessing step provides clear information about whether the wisdom of both poles is being leveraged. All the energy being invested in resisting or fighting can instead be directed toward finding action steps that promise to gain the upside of both poles.

Some teacher evaluation models around the country already include positive ways to leverage the needs of both poles, including:

• Building on how high-performing countries such as Finland and Singapore have professionalized the teaching profession;

• Using research on motivation, which comes not from rewards and punishment but from autonomy, mastering skills or knowledge, and a sense of purpose (Pink, 2009);

• Establishing clear markers for professional growth as well as a response to intervention model for helping teachers develop expertise; and

• Ensuring that models account for varying levels of students with special needs or other considerations that affect teacher

workload and impact.

Besides these action steps, we can note action steps that warn we aren't leveraging this polarity very well — signs that manifest earlier than teacher strikes.

MOVING TOWARD AGREEMENT

There are many similar polarities in education, where over-focus on one side eventually brings on a policy swing: Think of the cycles of methods for reading instruction, emphasizing key knowledge or key practices within disciplines, or even how leadership is distributed.

Darling-Hammond (2010) points out that not only do these ongoing battles slow progress on student learning, but "the students most harmed are the most vulnerable students in urban and poor rural schools, where the political currents are strongest and changes of course most frequent" (p. 15).

While the process takes time, the results can bring agreement where polarization existed, pinpoint the best allocation of resources, re-energize collaboration around mutual goals, and stop the policy swings that are inevitable when polarities are misdiagnosed as solvable problems.

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