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Walk-Throughs for Effective Schools: Using the Informal Observation Instrument

Dr. Ross Sherman, Dr. Wesley Hickey and Ms. Cynthia Sherman

Time is one of the most highly sought after and prized commodities for an educational leader. Most principals will tell you that if they had more time, they would be more effective in accomplishing the goals of the organization. Often, principals are torn between competing interests and goals. Although there may be numerous goals identified, one is non-negotiable – student achievement. Student achievement is often predicated on the quality of the teacher in the classroom, which can be influenced by the supervision of the principal. The purpose of this article is to outline a time-saving, effective supervisory classroom walk-through technique that provides the foundation for increasing teacher effectiveness.

Instructional Supervision

Research over the past 30 years has established the principal's instructional leadership as the lynch pin in promoting student achievement (Edmonds, 1979; Cotton, 2000; Schleicher, 2009; Milanowski, 2011). However, the application of a principal's instructional leadership has changed (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). In the 1960's, the development of the clinical supervision model dictated a series of steps in which the principal would engage for effective instructional leadership (Goldhammer, 1969). The centerpiece to this process was a principal's observation of the teaching process. Although the model evolved over time, the basic process remained unchanged throughout the latter part of the 20th century. The principal typically collected data on the teacher's effectiveness through classroom observations.

The ability to dedicate the amount of time required to implement the process became more difficult to carve out of the day. An alternative to the formal observation process was the use of walk-throughs to

establish the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom (Skretta, 2007). A walk-through consists of a brief visit to the classroom to collect data on the teacher's effectiveness. They allow the principal to be engaged in instructional leadership in a time efficient manner. However, two critical components of any teacher observation are the validity and reliability of the system. In essence, is the observation an accurate representation of what occurs in the classroom (validity), and it is a true representation of what occurs in the classroom over time (reliability). Therefore, any system of instructional leadership, whether it involves formal observations or walk-throughs, would need to be valid and reliable.

State of Texas

The state of Texas uses an aligned system for curriculum and assessment. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) is the official curriculum of the state. According to the Texas Education Agency, the TEKS are written at and above Bloom's application level (Bloom, Krathwohl, & Masia, 1984) and address Erick-

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son's (2002) concepts, principles and generalizations. Therefore, teachers should be engaging students in complex thinking (using Bloom's Taxonomy) and complex content (using Erickson's Structure of Knowledge) to assure the TEKS are taught at the appropriate level to assure student success.

Students demonstrate the acquisition of the TEKS by their performance on the state mandated State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The state does not mandate a system of instruction; therefore, it allows the individual district, school, or teacher to make those decisions. Conversely, any system of instruction should facilitate the acquisition of the TEKS. Therefore, the system of classroom observation should assess whether the teacher is teaching the TEKS at the level necessary for mastering the

STAAR.

Informal Observation Instrument

The Informal Observation Instrument allows a principal to collect the data necessary to assure the teacher is providing instruction at the degree of complexity necessary for success on the STAAR (see Figure 1). The principal would document what is happening in the classroom by focusing on three areas:

- 1) *Instructional methods* to determine if the instruction is teacher-directed (deductive) or student-centered (inductive).
- 2) *Holistic evaluation* to determine if the teacher is providing academic learning time (students on task, at the correct level of difficulty and experiencing success).
- 3) *Instructional practices* to determine if the instruction in the

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Figure 1. Informal Observation Instrument

Teacher:		
Grade Level:		
Subject:		
Lesson/Activity Observed:		

Instructional Methods		
The teacher utilized:		
1) Teacher-directed (Lesson Cycle, etc.)	Yes	No
2) Student-centered (Inquiry, Cooperative, etc.)	Yes	No
Holistic Evaluation:		
1) The students were on task?	Yes	No
2) The students were at the correct level of difficulty?	Yes	No
3) The students were experiencing success?	Yes	No
Instructional Practices		
The teacher used the following instructional practices:		
1) Engaged students in complex thinking	Yes	No
2) Engaged students in complex content	Yes	No

classroom engages students in complex thinking (using Bloom's Taxonomy) and complex content (using Erickson's Structure of Knowledge).

Instructional methods. There are numerous instructional methodologies within education, and a teacher who is an expert in his/her discipline will have many subtle ways to vary instruction to meet the needs of individual students. However, instructional methods can be grouped into being either teacher-directed (deductive) or student-centered (inductive). Either of these general methods may be appropriate in the classroom at different times depending on students' needs.

Teacher-directed instruction is often aligned with the classic work of Hunter (1994). Her lesson cycle includes the development of a focus to get the attention of learners, a clearly stated lesson objective, teacher-directed explanation and modeling of the pertinent knowledge and skills, checking for understanding both formatively and summatively, and providing students with both guided and independent practice. The lesson cycle does not preclude student-centered activities, and these are often embedded in the process.

Student-centered assignments are those that require active involvement with the concepts being taught. Schlechty (2011) stated that a teacher's role in developing lessons was to provide experiences within the work that supports the curriculum. Doing this would create the types of laboratory experiments, projects, and inquiry-based learning that would be considered student-centered. This type of

work is often very engaging and motivating for students, which increases the likelihood of mastery.

Holistic evaluation. The Informal Observation Instrument provides a focus on the student experience in the classroom. An emphasis on student engagement may seem simplistic, but keeping a consistent focus on student learning is often difficult in schools (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). There are numerous stimuli that can distract from learning, including the common problem of apathy. However, effective teaching is not about just presenting information. Teaching does not occur unless the learner learns. This is impossible without engagement.

A component of holistic evaluation and effective student engagement is that the curriculum is taught to the student at the correct level of difficulty. Presenting material that is too easy creates boredom (Harris, 2011), and making work too hard can create learned helplessness, especially among those who consistently struggle with understanding (Alderman, 2008). Teaching at the correct level of difficulty requires a as well as the artistic flair of meeting the individual needs of students. Meeting these individual needs will lead to students' success, and few things are more motivating than achievement. A student who is successful with an activity that is engaging and at the correct level of difficult, is likely to continue striving for success.

Instructional practice. Success on standardized tests is based upon understanding the curriculum at a depth that ensures competent application. This means that a teacher

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must provide activities and questioning that provides for higher level thinking as indicated by Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1984) and is structured to increase complex content as addressed in the work of Erickson (2002). Developing this learning depth is often a struggle with even the best teachers, so a walk-through instrument that provides a consistent and fair evaluation provides an important reminder.

Conclusion

The Informal Observation Instrument requires just a few minutes to complete and is a valid representation of the teaching observed. Research suggested that walk-throughs could have increased validity beyond the brief time the principal spends in the classroom. Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) conducted research that found 30-second silent video clips of a teacher being judged by strangers was highly correlated with end of course student evaluations. This suggested something that many administrators have recognized: it does not take much time to know if a teacher is being effective. Longer visits may provide more detailed data, but the classroom environment, students' responses, and instructor's organization becomes apparent immediately.

These walk-throughs are an initial step towards teacher improvement, but they become meaningless without follow-up. Recognition of teacher struggles requires coaching and support (Pas & Newman, 2013), and this should be focused on the areas identified through classroom visits, shared understandings of need based on conversations, and consistent follow-up to see if improvement is occurring.

Teachers are often resistant to change, even when it is apparent that the current course of action is not working. Therefore, consistent and professional "nudges" toward increased classroom effectiveness is an ongoing process.

The focal points of this walk-through form should only be the first step in a more comprehensive instructional leadership plan. The feedback from the Informal Observation Instrument will provide areas for professional improvement in significant components of teacher performance, but a professional teacher should always seek improvement with developing lessons that engage students deeply (Schlechty, 2011). This includes improving in the utilization of best practices within one's discipline (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2012). The strategic professional development plan for a campus should take into account the type of performances that make for outstanding teaching.

These deep and focused professional development opportunities begin with the campus leader being in the classroom. The principal making periodic visits and comparing them to previous walk-throughs increases the reliability of the observations, and the ability to complete the form in a relatively short time makes it a time efficient system. As the old Navy adage states: Inspect what you expect! The Informal Observation Instrument as a tool for walk-throughs allows campus leaders to use a classroom visitation system that is valid, reliable and time efficient.

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