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Framing Informal Classroom Observations

In This Chapter...

- ◆ The intent of teacher observation and instructional supervision
- ◆ Informal classroom observations
- ◆ Link informal classroom observations to schoolwide instructional improvement efforts
- ◆ Guidelines for informal classroom observations

To endure, a supervisory program that includes informal classroom observations that go beyond hit and miss requires an understanding of the intents of teacher observation and supervision. Informal classroom observations need to be based on guidelines to bolster teacher learning and development, and they should not be viewed or conducted as a “drive-through” in which a principal blitzes in and out of the classroom without offering some type of feedback. The drive-through approach just does not give the principal enough time to capture the events of the classroom, to collect data that are stable, or to provide enough hooks to engage the teacher in reflective dialogue.

THE INTENT OF TEACHER OBSERVATION AND INSTRUCTIONAL SUPERVISION

Observing teachers in action is the primary way of assessing teaching. Through formal and informal classroom observations, principals gain insights into classroom practices: instructional strategies, learning activities (including performance assessments), the taught curriculum, and the types of teacher and student interactions that evolve throughout the course of instruction. Effective classroom observations support the overall instructional program and the teachers who deliver it. Classroom

observations also signal to teachers that the principal cares about them and the work they do. The principal's classroom presence promotes a healthy climate and creates conditions for the ongoing discussion, reflection, and refinement of practices.

Both Teachers and Principals Benefit From Classroom Observations

Classroom observations, whether they are formal or informal, provide opportunities for both the principal and the teacher to develop a broader range of understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning. For this range of understanding to emerge, classroom observations must occur over time with sustained attention to the processes used to observe teachers (observation tools are examined in chapter 4). Classroom observations provide opportunities *for teachers* to do the following:

- ◆ learn more about their teaching through the principal's support and presence;
- ◆ extend talk about teaching and reduce feelings of isolation;
- ◆ examine what works well and which areas of instruction or class-room management could be enhanced by modifying practice;
- ◆ receive affirmation of their instructional efforts; and
- ◆ gauge short- and long-term efforts by examining objective data collected over a sustained period of time.

For principals, there are benefits and opportunities as well. Principals benefit from informal observations because they

- ◆ learn more about teaching and learning;
- ◆ share alternative strategies observed in other classrooms with teachers;
- ◆ frame professional development opportunities for teachers across grade levels and subject areas;
- ◆ obtain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the classroom and how teachers handle these complexities;
- ◆ lend assistance to teachers who have needs;
- ◆ gain more than snapshot views of teachers; and
- ◆ enhance the supervisory and evaluation plan at the site.

The intent of supervision is to improve teaching and to lend assistance to teachers as they move throughout their careers. To this end, supervision is a proactive, ongoing set of processes and procedures.

INFORMAL CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Every school system has processes in place for formal teacher evaluations that are based on state statutes regarding evaluation, union agreements, and other context-specific factors that make each school system unique. It is wise to know system-wide policies and procedures, along with the history of supervision at the site. Notwithstanding, the way that informal observations are conducted will dictate teachers' willingness to embrace this practice as an ongoing component of professional learning.

Management by Wandering Around

Informal classroom observation has evolved in the literature and in practice. Recently, there has been resurgence in attention to informal classroom observation. The popularity of informal classroom observation can be tied to the *management by wandering around* (MBWA) movement, popularized by Peters and Waterman (1982) in their book *In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America's Best Run Companies*.

Executives who embraced MBWA promoted informal communication and personal involvement with employees by getting out of the office. Through this accessibility and visibility, executives were able to ensure accountability and affirm the work of employees. The practice of informal classroom observations also embraces getting supervision and evaluation out of the main office, situating principals as active participants in the instructional lives of their teachers by promoting visibility and accessibility.

Walking-Around Supervision and Short Visits

In the supervision and teacher evaluation literature, informal classroom observations have been tied to both formative and summative evaluation practices. Manning (1988) asserted that information about teachers gleaned from "walking-around supervision" and "short visits" should be included as summative samplings in the overall evaluation of teaching. Although the two are similar, Manning makes a sharp distinction between walking-around supervision and short visits. Walking-around supervision promotes the visibility of the principal but primarily in the lunchrooms, "in the halls ... before and after the first bell in the morning, and immediately before the dismissal bell in the afternoon" (p. 145). During these and other times, the principal takes in information about instruction and plans short visits if there is a need (e.g., a teacher who is having difficulties with classroom management or a teacher who is regarded as having an exemplary instructional method). According to Manning, short visits last longer, "less than a full class period." Also, "it is important to always follow up a short visit with a brief conference," especially "if a problem is noted, [so] the principal can discuss this ... and plan for an additional evaluation" (p. 146).

Catch Teachers in the Act of Teaching

The principal does *not* conduct informal classroom visitations to catch the teacher off guard or to interrupt classroom activities. Informal classroom observations allow principals to affirm what teachers are doing right by encouraging them to keep up the momentum. Moreover, informal observations allow the principal and teacher to celebrate successes in teaching and student learning.

Informal observations are one way instructional supervisors can get to know their teachers. By observing teacher's work *in their classrooms*, principals can exert informed effort and energy to assist teachers beyond formally scheduled observations. Informal observations provide opportunities for supervisors to:

- ◆ motivate teachers;
- ◆ monitor instruction;
- ◆ be accessible and provide support; and
- ◆ keep informed about instruction in the school (Blasé & Blasé, 1998, pp. 108–109)

An Observation by Any Other Name

Sometimes referred to as *pop-ins*, *walk-ins*, or *drop-ins*, informal classroom observations have the following characteristics:

- ◆ They are brief, lasting approximately 15 to 20 minutes (perhaps longer).
- ◆ They can occur at the beginning, middle, or end of a period.
- ◆ They can occur at any time during the school day.
- ◆ They focus on a variety of aspects, including instruction, use of time, classroom management, transitions between learning activities, or the clarity of instructions.

Informal classroom observation is a strategy for getting into classrooms, with the intent of focusing on teaching, learning, and the interactions between teachers and students as the events of instruction unfold. As a strategy, the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2007) reports:

The walk-through can be defined as a brief, structured non-evaluative classroom observation by the principal that is followed by a conversation between the principal and the teacher about what was observed. Used well, the walk-through can provide both principal and teacher with valuable information about the status of the school's instructional program. (p. 1)

A promising practice emerging in the field is the learning walk. The learning walk consists of teams of teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators who target grade levels or subject areas to conduct brief, 7- to 10-minute classroom observations

as teams. The focus of the learning walk is to examine how teachers teach and how students learn. There is typically a focus for the learning walk—questioning strategies, wait time, variety of instructional strategies, classroom management, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, and so on. The group conducts the learning walk, debriefs about the data for a few minutes and then as a group goes into another classroom for 7 to 10 minutes, debriefs, and the cycle continues. At the end of the day, the walk teams summarize the data and then engage in conversations with the teachers whose classrooms were observed.

Informal observations are not intended to supplant formal ones; they do not include a preobservation conference. Too often, however, informal classroom observations also forgo postobservation conferences. The value of the informal observation, which culminates with an opportunity to talk with teachers, is that principals can strengthen their relationships with teachers by communicating *something* about what was observed. In fact, a majority of informal observations should include some type of follow-up conversation about teaching and learning. Chapter 4 details tools that can be used to chronicle what is observed during informal classroom observations, and chapter 5 offers techniques for communicating what is observed, along with strategies to assist teachers in reflecting on their practices. Chapter 6 provides some insights on how principals can engage teachers in discussion about student work.

How Much Time Is Enough?

The interest in informal classroom observations was piqued by the Downey Informal Observation method in which principals spend 3 to 5 minutes observing a classroom (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2005). Although that method will certainly get supervision out of the main office, the principal is encouraged to spend more than 3 to 5 minutes in the classroom so that the principal and teacher have a meaningful experience. The brevity of the egg-timer approach to classroom observation minimizes data collection. It is preferable to conduct fewer but longer informal observations on a daily basis. This extra time will pay short- and long-term dividends—connecting with teachers while deriving a more accurate sense of the classroom activities observed. Another dividend is movement toward high-quality learning for the teachers who are entrusted to educate children.

The principal's daily struggle is to find time for mandatory formal classroom observations and informal classroom visits. Although no clear-cut solution to this problem applies across all school systems, many principals have found creative ways to make the most of their available human resources and to provide a supervisory program centered on teachers' needs. Cues to include the administrative team with informal classroom observations were discussed in chapter 1. A commitment to being more visible to teachers will be strengthened by the impact that classroom visitations can have on bolstering the instructional program.

LINK INFORMAL OBSERVATIONS TO SCHOOLWIDE INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

It is not uncommon for schools to identify an instructional focus and targeted strategies for the year. For principals who work with their teachers to identify instructional strategies to master for the year, informal classroom observations can be instrumental in helping the principal provide focused feedback to teachers. Because the principal gets out and about, she has the opportunity to see first-hand instructional efforts toward implementing strategies. During postobservation conferences, she has the opportunity to help teachers reflect on how these strategies are being implemented, provide the forum for joint exploration on refining instructional practices, to affirm the work teachers are doing help student learn.

At Creekland Middle School (Lawrenceville, GA, Gwinnett County Public Schools), principal Dr. Bill Kruskamp and the 170 teachers agreed that they would spend a year mastering six strategies, assess how these strategies were being implemented and refined, and then move forward with identifying more strategies to build on the original six:

- ◆ Collaboration;
- ◆ Differentiation;
- ◆ Student Engagement;
- ◆ Summarizing;
- ◆ Display of Student Work; and
- ◆ Essential Question (EQ).

With close to 3,000 students at Creekland Middle School, the largest middle school in the state of Georgia and one of the largest in the United States, the administrative team was aware that they had to make informal classroom observations purposeful and that they had to take every opportunity to connect the work of teachers to the overall schoolwide instructional improvement efforts.

To ensure that informal classroom observations focused on the six strategies, Bill Kruskamp and the six assistant principals developed their own informal classroom observation tool (see Tool 3).

Tool 3: Focused Informal Classroom Observations— Creekland Middle School*

Teacher: *Lori Miller*

Date: *March 14, 2008*

Administrator: *Bill Kruskamp*

Class Period: 1 2 3 (4) 5 6 7 8

Common Classroom Expectations:

- ◆ Collaboration
- ◆ Differentiation
- ◆ Student Engagement
- ◆ Summarizing
- ◆ Display of Student Work
- ◆ Essential Question (EQ):

<i>Expectation Domains</i>	<i>Presence = X</i>
1. Assessment: Frequently assess students' learning of the AKS and gives specific feedback to the students and parents.	
2. Nonverbal Representations: Uses a variety of nonverbal/visual representations of content and skills.	
3. Modeling and Practice: Models strategies and skills. Provides multiple opportunities for distributed practice followed by independent practice.	X
4. Vocabulary: Explicitly teaches essential content-related vocabulary.	
5. Summarizing: Explicitly teaches students to summarize their learning.	X
6. Collaboration: Provides collaborative learning opportunities.	
7. Student Goal Setting: Teaches and requires students to set personal goals for improving their academic achievement.	
8. Literacy: Explicitly teaches skills for improving reading and writing proficiency/literacy across the content areas.	

Tool continues on next page.

<i>Expectation Domains</i>	<i>Presence = X</i>
9. Problem-Solving: Uses inquiry-based, problem-solving learning strategies with students in all content areas.	
10. Questioning: Uses and teaches questioning and cuing/prompting techniques.	X
11. Background Knowledge: Accesses and/or builds students' background knowledge and experiences.	
12. Comparison and Contrast: Teaches students to compare and contrast knowledge, concepts, and content.	
13. Technology: Uses technology effectively to plan, teach, and assess.	

Comments:

Lori: Getting to higher-order questions supported your assessment in two ways: (1) students summarized what they had learned and (2) students were "stretched" to answer questions that showed mastery of content. For example, you asked, "What is democracy?", then you asked students to identify democratic practices in local politicians, and then you asked students: "How do you apply democratic principles in their everyday life?" I enjoyed the classroom observation. I will look for some materials that I may have regarding democracy that may help you."

Throughout the year, the administrative team debriefed to learn as a collective what was occurring instructionally at Creekland Middle School. From their discussions, professional development was geared to assist teachers master skills and then to focus, and in some instances refocus, their attention during subsequent informal classroom observations. Tool 4 illustrates a focus on the relationship between the essential question and summarizing.

*Used with permission. Dr. Bill Kruskamp, principal, Creekland Middle School, Gwinnett County Public Schools (Lawrenceville, GA).

Tool 4: Informal Classroom Observation: The Essential Question and Summarizing*—Creekland Middle School

Teacher: *Andy Bercher*

Date: *March 27, 2008*

Essential Questions: Yes No

- ◆ Posted
- ◆ Guides Instruction
- ◆ Used at the end of lessons to assist summarizing and gather evidence of learning.

Summarizing: Yes No

- ◆ Reflects evidence of student learning
- ◆ All students participating
- ◆ Guided by the essential questions

What the students were doing?

Students were working in pairs with manipulatives as they solved algebraic equations.

Comments:

Andy, you really had the students engaged in this lesson! When students reported out from their groups, it was clear that they were able to summarize their learning about balancing the two sides of the equation. I look forward to seeing where this lesson continues and students gain mastery.

Thanks—Bill

A treasure chest of classroom observation tools suitable for the informal classroom observation is offered later in this book.

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GUIDELINES FOR INFORMAL CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

The following guidelines for informal classroom observations are offered as a starting point for framing this important work.

Guidelines for Informal Classroom Observations

Informally Observe All Teachers

All teachers can benefit from informal classroom observation. Refrain from “overobserving” particular teachers (e.g., only teachers who are having difficulty, beginning teachers, teachers who teach subject areas that are heavily tested). Informal classroom observation should last between 15 and 20 minutes; therefore, conduct only as many observations in a day as you can follow up on either the same day or the very next day. Teachers need and deserve some type of immediate feedback.

Informally Observe as Often as You Can

The principal’s presence in classrooms sends a positive message to teachers: *the principal cares*. Including informal classroom observation as a schoolwide initiative requires consistency and frequency. Become opportunistic in finding time in the day to observe teachers, and vary the time of the day in which you observe teachers. What occurs in the morning is much different from what occurs in the afternoon.

Watch, Listen, and Write, but Focus on One or Two Areas

Although there is no predetermined focus established because there is no preobservation conference, find a focus based on the instruction, events, or discussions that are occurring in the classroom. As much as possible, avoid publicizing personal biases that may encourage teachers to “play to the audience.” For example, if the principal is a proponent of cooperative learning, teachers might be tempted to transition to cooperative learning activities once the principal enters the room.

Given that informal observations are relatively brief (15–20 minutes) compared to an extended classroom observation (30–45 minutes), data from a single focus will make for richer conversation during follow-up discussion.

Guidelines for Informal Classroom Observations

Let it Be Obvious That You Are Having Fun

A principal's demeanor sends strong messages: either the principal enjoys being out and about, or the principal grudgingly engages in informal classroom observations. Let your body language and facial expressions communicate that you are enjoying the time in the classroom. Think about how you want teachers and students to view you.

Catch Them in the Act of Doing Something Right and Applaud Efforts

Look for victories rather than failures and applaud them. Work to create an ethos of sharing. Teachers who are especially adept at a strategy or technique need time and opportunities for sharing their expertise with others. For example, a certain amount of time at weekly or monthly faculty meetings could be set aside for teachers to share insights or techniques with one another.

Make the Time to Follow Up

Follow-up communication to informal classroom observation is a critical component. Through conversations and reflection, teachers better understand the complexities of their work. Feedback and dialogue form the cornerstone of all supervisory activities.

Follow Up With Resources

After feedback, the effective principal also makes available resources that teachers need to refine practice. The principal's efforts to return for a follow-up informal observation might be one such resource.

Make Informal Observations Invitational

Encourage teachers to invite you to observe them. Teachers who are experimenting with novel instructional approaches or whose students are making presentations would welcome the opportunity for the principal to be present.

Source: Adapted from FutureCents (2005).

Looking Ahead ...

The next chapter explores the intent of data collection and some broad techniques to consider before exploring and applying the classroom observation tools presented in chapter 4.