How classroom OBSERVATIONS Can Support Systematic Improvement In Teacher Effectiveness

This booklet includes information about the ways that observation systems can help improve teachers’ use of effective teaching practices.

Part 5 of a 5 Part Series:
A Practitioner’s Guide to Conducting Classroom Observations: What the Research Tells Us About Choosing and Using Observational Systems to Assess and Improve Teacher Effectiveness

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Observation as One Component of Improving Teacher Effectiveness

How can we best use observational methodology and the data acquired from our observations to help teachers meet the challenges they face and improve the quality of their classroom practice?

Creating a highly effective professional development system is a sizable task. It means orienting ourselves towards ongoing, individualized support for teachers that is grounded in educational and developmental theory as well as cutting-edge empirical research regarding the specific teacher practices that impact students’ growth and development.

This is a significant shift from the current standard, a workshop-based, one-size-fits-all approach that, although often rooted in sound educational theory, does not always speak to the issues with which individual teachers are struggling and does not provide ongoing access to individualized feedback and support.

Basing professional development efforts on data from standardized and validated observational tools is a productive first step, as it anchors feedback in teachers’ actual practice along dimensions of teaching that truly matter.

Beyond systematically incorporating observation and direct feedback as an organizational policy, how can a system use observations as effective levers for change? We offer four broad guiding principles:

1. Use observations in the context of relationships.
2. Establish a shared vision of what matters in classrooms and use tools that directly assess those components of teaching.
3. Use observational data to provide supportive, constructive feedback.
4. Use observational data to facilitate follow-through and long-term charting of progress.

Use Observations in the Context of Relationships

Professional development efforts are most successful when they are embedded in the context of supportive relationships between teachers and those making observations and providing feedback. Just as students learn best and are willing to take the risks necessary to progress in the context of supportive relationships with teachers, teachers need to know that they are valued collaborative partners, that their intent, concerns, and goals are understood, and that consultants/mentors/administrators will meet them where they are and offer a balance of support and challenge going forward to help them make the greatest strides in their practice.

In a similar vein, it is crucial that those giving feedback notice and reinforce teachers’ strengths in addition to focusing on areas of challenge or weakness.

CASE STUDY #1: The Importance of Relationships

Mr. Jones feels slightly anxious as he anticipates the arrival of Dr. Taylor, his assigned staff development professional this year. He has had contact with Dr. Taylor only once before, at the first of his two yearly observational assessments. Dr. Taylor has called in advance to arrange a time to observe, but called back this morning saying he would be delayed and would try to make it in the afternoon. Mr. Jones understands that delays can be unavoidable, but he had prepared his whole morning so that Dr. Taylor would be able to observe him testing out some new strategies that he really wanted help with.

When Dr. Taylor arrives, he is friendly and courteous, but seems rushed and leaves after only a short observation. He leaves a copy of his evaluation for Mr. Jones to read with a brief note thanking Mr. Jones for his time, but as they never talked about Mr. Jones’ areas of concern and interest, the evaluation does not touch on the aspects of Mr. Jones’ teaching that he really wanted help with. Mr. Jones wishes that he could sit down with Dr. Taylor and share his thoughts, rather than being “tested” by a system that is not individualized to where he is as a professional. In addition, there are no concrete suggestions for fine-tuning his practice or links to the specific behaviors that Mr. Jones engaged in that resulted in determinations of “needs attention,” “meets expectations,” or “does not meet expectations.” Overall, Mr. Jones does not find the results of the evaluation particularly useful.

Mr. Lee has a very different experience of being observed. At the start-of-the-school-year in-service meetings, all teachers received an orientation to the observational system that the school would be using; they got a sense of what kinds of teaching behaviors were important to incorporate into their practice and how they could expect those practices to impact students. Teachers were then assigned to coaches, who gave brief orientations to their groups of teachers; coaches outlined their professional development system and how it would work this year; then met with individual
Professional development is most effective when it is constructed around helping teachers make improvements in areas of their job that really matter for students, when those areas targeted for observation and improvement are clearly defined, and when all participants agree that the targets of the observation are valid goals to work towards.

Selecting a tool that has demonstrated associations between the observationally-based scores and high priority aspects of student development is helpful in getting all participants on the same page about what is being observed and why. The behaviors being observed can be directly translated into goals for practice. The language used by the tool provides members of an organization with a shared vocabulary and underlying understanding of program goals and facilitates clear communication and collaboration.

Use observational data to provide supportive, constructive feedback

Observational data contributes to professional development efforts only if it is shared effectively with teachers. Providing feedback to teachers about the results of their observations and helping them reflect on this feedback in productive ways provides the bridge between knowledge about what matters for students and changes in teachers’ actual practice.

Both the content and style with which feedback is communicated are important areas to consider. Our recommendation, stemming from successful observationally-based professional development initiatives, is that feedback is most effective when it is focused on increasing teachers’ own powers of observation, promoting reflection and self-evaluation skills, promoting intentionality around behaviors and patterns of interaction with students, helping teachers see the impact of their behaviors more clearly, and assisting teachers in improving their implementation of lessons and activities. Doing this means providing feedback that is very specific and behavioral in nature and balances attention to positives/strengths with providing constructive challenges.

Use of video cameras can be an extremely effective tool in providing specific, constructive feedback to teachers about their behaviors with students. When video footage is available, it allows consultants to not only tell teachers what they saw, but to watch the interactions alongside the teachers in a highly objective way. Teachers are better able to share their perspectives when they are able to watch interactions on video after the fact. Video footage can serve to facilitate discussions about areas of both strength and challenge because both teacher and consultant can observe the interaction and the resulting student behavior and brainstorm about why that interaction worked or didn’t work, and what could be done differently (in the case of challenging areas) or how these kinds of interactions can be expanded and intentionally incorporated into other activities (in the case of areas of strength or in the instance of highly successful interactions).

Teachers may be initially apprehensive about the practice of videotaping, but with sensitive support, they often come to see this as an extremely empowering tool. They are able to see, firsthand, exactly what happened, rather than relying on someone else’s retelling of the event, and are able to reflect on a sequence of events and collect their thoughts about it before reviewing with a consultant.

The use of videotaping allows discussions to hone in on specific behavioral sequences and to watch student...
responses carefully, and, if used correctly, will be a welcome addition to the feedback process that allows teachers to clearly see progress in areas that they have been working on. This can be particularly powerful if they are able to view a less effective behavioral sequence and then a more successful sequence and think about the differences in their behaviors between the two and how subsequent student behavior changed in response.

Another guideline for effective feedback relates to depth and scope. It is often more useful for teachers to receive very specific feedback (depth) on fairly narrow areas of practice (scope) rather than to receive broader feedback on many different areas of practice simultaneously. Giving highly specific and behavioral feedback that promotes reflection and leads to change requires a great deal of attention and focus on the part of the observer and teacher. Therefore, we recommend selecting one specific area of focus at a time when giving feedback to avoid cognitive overload and a watering down of feedback in each area. Various areas of practice can be prioritized and addressed sequentially rather than simultaneously.

CASE STUDY #2: Providing Effective Feedback

Ms. McIntyre, a student teacher, was formally observed by her lead teacher, Dr. Douglas, on three occasions. After the first observation, the two meet after school to talk over Dr. Douglas’ feedback. Dr. Douglas has used an observation system that includes 5 broad areas of practice, each of which has 7-10 sub-categories. Dr. Douglas diligently goes through Ms. McIntyre’s level of performance in all 43 areas. Because there are so many areas, Dr. Douglas feels that she only has time to touch on the level of proficiency Ms. McIntyre demonstrated in each area, without going into much detail or giving many examples of specific behaviors observed. Both Dr. Douglas and Ms. McIntyre feel dissatisfied with the process, and Ms. McIntyre is not exactly sure how to improve in areas that she feels less confident about.

The next time Dr. Douglas conducts a formal observation, she decides that she will focus feedback only on an area of exceptional strength and an area that Ms. McIntyre reports struggling with. Although she observes all 43 areas of practice, the feedback is much more directed. Dr. Douglas is able to give specific examples of the kinds of teacher and student behaviors she observed, and tell Ms. McIntyre exactly how her follow-up responses to students’ comments increased their engagement, as well as how missing early signs of some disengagement resulted in time taken out of the lesson to redirect behavior. This feels more helpful to both parties, but it is still hard for Ms. McIntyre to resonate with the missed early signals feedback, precisely because she had missed them.

For the next observation, Dr. Douglas and Ms. McIntyre agree to videotape the lesson so that they can review the tape together and see the exact same behavioral exchanges. Taking this approach allows Ms. McIntyre to see exactly where she needed to shift her attention and pinpoint some changes she could make in her physical presence in the classroom (moving around vs. always standing at the front of the room), in the frequency with which she scanned the room, and in how she responded when she noticed a student who appeared bored. Again, Dr. Douglas could still rate all 43 areas of practice if needed, but this kind of focused feedback supported by the use of video footage was much more helpful to Ms. McIntyre than reviewing large numbers of scores.

Use Observational Data to Facilitate Follow-Through and Long-Term Charting of Progress

Making a single observation and providing feedback is a useful start, but to be effective, the observation-feedback cycle needs to be repeated multiple times over the course of a year, with goals created after the first observation being carried forward into subsequent observations, so that what was discussed in the feedback stages of the initial observation session is specifically addressed in follow-up observations. Just as teachers are encouraged to do formative assessment with their students in order to help them learn, this type of formative assessment of teachers’ practices can help them recognize and improve their teaching. Similar to formative assessments of student learning, teachers and support personnel can use data from observations to guide planning for how teachers will make changes and to guide the selection of behaviors that will be the focus of follow-up observations. This process of feeding data back into the system maximizes the effectiveness of efforts to make improvements in teaching practice. Charting progress, being able to document systematic progress towards goals (or lack thereof), and recording agreed-upon strategies for making changes all help make observational data a highly effective medium for providing professional development support.

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