Encouraging and Implementing Classroom Observation Protocols:
How Effective School Leaders Collaborate with Teachers to Support Exemplary Teaching and Learning

Savilla I. Banister and John M. Fischer

Bowling Green State University, USA

Abstract

Effective school leadership focuses on supporting teachers and students in the classroom. Educational leaders are instructional leaders. In order to nurture meaningful strategies that support student learning, school administrators must spend time in classrooms: observing, interacting and collecting data. Gaining familiarity with various observation protocols and employing options that best align with the school's vision, can provide leaders with useful tools to assist in establishing a collegial climate for powerful educational reform.

Keywords: classroom observation, observation protocols, collegial climate, data-driven decision making, educational reform research

Introduction

Why Observation is Important

In some parts of the world, teaching has often been done out of view, behind closed doors. School leaders often focused on the operation of the building, getting the walls painted, making sure deliveries were on time for supplies. Fullan and colleagues (2006) argue that "very few policy makers, or practitioners for that matter, really understand what quality means on a daily basis." Bereiter (2002) calls the disengagement from the core activity of instruction the

"fundamental malady" of school reform.

However, more and more evidence has emerged that a key ingredient in school improvement is to focus on that singular moment when teacher and student work together in the learning process (Protheroe, 2010; Resnick, Spillane, Goldman, and Rangel, 2010; Danielson, 2002). Watching teaching, whether it is done by peers, or by educational leaders, serves as one of the most important means of improving practice, and more importantly, improving student learning.

1. Focus of Classroom Observations

Observations of a teachers work with his or her students can take many forms. It might be a quick visit by the principal that last only a few minutes and focuses on a specific teaching strategy the faculty have been working to master. It also might be a longer visit watching a lesson develop from its introduction all the way through a concept and then brought to conclusion as students transition to a next class or lesson.

Schlecty (2002, p. 114) has talked about schools working to be learning organizations focusing on common purpose, common questions. What teaching practices are generating evidence of improved teaching and learning? At the same time it is important that we fight the isolation that can define teaching and instead work to build professional communities of teachers (Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 1999). These groups of teachers can be working together to focus on struggles with particular strategies and concepts while observing each other and working to improve the school.

Becoming aware of the critical moments in a classroom, those key points where inquiry and concepts become intertwined, is essential. Boykin and Noguera (2012) have urged those watching and observing teaching to look for "on-task" behavior—who is taking part in discussions? How are questions being asked? They also ask us to find ways to watch of deep involvement, that sense that students are truly engaged in the topic and the activities occurring in the classroom.

Good teaching matters to student learning. The process of good teaching has become more and more defined. Amongst other things teachers need to:
- Create strong learning environments
- Set objectives, reinforce effort, provide recognition
- Use strong questions
- Extend and apply knowledge

(Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, Stone, 2012; Schmoker, 2001; Marzano, 2007)

Hence, the reform challenge calls for a refocusing on the what and how of learning(Nature of Learning, p. 28) Observations of teaching helps the school leader and the teaches on a faculty build strong relationships. These relationships are not built on punitive observation scoring systems, but rather, by adopting a stance of humility and curiosity, a sense of shared purpose and community can be developed. Leaders need to develop what Senge (2006) calls openness--one attribute of systems leadership.

2. Creating a Collegial Climate for Access

In order to engage in the iterative work of collecting meaningful data from school classrooms, leaders must first cultivate a collegial climate for access. Nurturing an environment of openness to regular classroom observation visits from their supervisors is a challenging enterprise, from the viewpoint of the classroom teacher. Teachers often feel threatened when those above their rank enter their schoolroom territory. School leaders can be seen as overly critical, and their perceived (and certain?) power over teachers' very livelihoods can add an element of extreme stress. For these reasons, if an effective leader is to implement successful and beneficial classroom observation protocols, practical steps to gain collegial access must be taken. Practical steps to gain collegial classroom access include key features such as building relationships, establishing value, sharing protocols, starting small, making data collection transparent and negotiating logistics. These facets are described in detail below.

Building Relationships

Effective educational leaders work to build trusting relationships with all their stakeholders, including their teaching staff. Engaging in focused conversations and providing a listening ear are important components of this process. Responsiveness in providing authentic care and support of teachers, both in large and small needs, encourages teachers to believe in a leader's commitment to their professional wellbeing. Demonstrating contin-

ued awareness of the issues teachers are facing and being ready to offer assistance when called upon, creates a climate of care that lays the groundwork for more substantive growth in reform initiatives.

Establishing Value

As strong relationships are nurtured between school leaders and teachers, a case for the importance of classroom observations can be more meaningfully communicated. Teachers need to hear that, as instructional leaders, school administrators need to know more about the processes and dynamics of the classroom in order to support teachers and students. They need leverage to acquire resources for school needs from outside stakeholders, and classroom observation data can provide this. School leaders need to make connections for teacher mentors, and provide examples/evidence for further professional development for staff. As leaders share their commitment to the process of classroom observations openly with teachers, teachers can become more at ease with this practice.

Sharing Protocols

As school leaders plan to implement classroom observation processes, they need to openly share the instruments they plan to use with teachers. Aligning with building relationships, this practice allows teachers to learn more about what type of data administrators are collecting, and generate conversations on why this information might be important. Teachers need to know what leaders are looking for and why. If classroom observation pro-

tocols are not shared, teachers may feel threatened and spied upon. Protocols for classroom visits should not give the sense that these are covert operations, but, rather, they should affirm the collectively articulated priorities of the school. Discussing what data might be generated by using these instruments and noting how this data relates to school goals is imperative.

Starting Small

Once strong relationships are nurtured, the value of classroom observations is affirmed and possible observation protocols are shared, school administrators are ready to begin visiting classrooms. Finding time to sit in on many sessions of teaching can be difficult, so beginning to do so in smaller increments is advisable. It is best to start with teachers who are the most willing to invite you into their classrooms, as they may be the most confident or the most interested in your support and feedback. Once leaders have had access to these classrooms, and have conducted several observational sessions there, others may be more willing to open up their doors to them. At this stage, school administrators should be diligent to demonstrate the non-threatening and collaborative benefits or these observations, sharing examples of findings with other teachers in formal and informal settings (once the classroom teacher observed has indicated their comfort with this). It is also worthwhile to provide some sort of related support to the classrooms observed, when this gesture relates directly from needs arising from the observations. This type of reciprocity demonstrates that, indeed, the data gleaned from ob-servation protocols yields positive, responsive interventions in the classrooms.

Making Data Collection Transparent

As mentioned previously, sharing the data collected via the selected observation protocols with the observed teacher first, and then asking the teacher's permission to share this data more broadly creates a respect for the teacher's interest and feedback. It is always possible that data collected in a particular setting is skewed based upon unusual circumstances, and a teacher's feedback can assist in making sure those outliers are taken into account. Discussing possible interpretations of the data set, getting the "back story" of the contextual considerations at work in the classroom, and brainstorming next steps for continued observation and implementation of educational strategies will reassure the teachers that this is an iterative process, intended for continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Beyond the individually observed teachers, school leaders should share publicly the successes, ideas, and discoveries embedded in the data sets with a broad array of educational stakeholders including teachers, students, parents and community members. Anecdotes, as well as aggregate data, can be used to drive decisions and showcase student and teacher successes.

Negotiating Logistics

Implementing a strategic approach for classroom observations requires focused attention on details. Some of these key logistics include communicating how

much time an administrator plans to be in a classroom and how often these visits will occur. In the beginning, it is most advisable to schedule these sessions in advance, so the teacher is aware of the visit, but leaders should tactfully and sensitively work to gain permission for unannounced visits. It is a best practice to always allow a teacher to say "this isn't a good time," as unexpected dynamics can cause situations that are not optimal for a purposeful and meaningful observation. Teachers are the experts in determining these cases, and leaders who are respectful of this fact will ultimately gain more access and continue to nurture a collegial climate for access.

3. Reviewing Potential Observational Protocol

Pixels in the Picture

Capturing data points to better understand the dynamics of educational environments can be compared to trying to reconstruct an image by adding one pixel at a time. A pixel is a very small dot of color information in an image, and it usually requires thousands of pixels to create a clear picture of a given scene of object. A school leader can never get a full view of what is occurring inside a classroom unless s/he is there every hour of every day, which, of course, is impossible. However, selecting classroom visit instruments that guide your observations while spending time in classrooms can provide focus and support for meaningful conversations. The importance of having a clear vision of school priorities and selecting protocols that align with those priorities is obvious. This will yield

data that can inform decisions for continual improvement of student learning experiences, based on identified targets.

This manuscript presents two protocols used by the writer to collect classroom data over a period of several years. Nicknamed the "longstop" and the "quickstop," these protocols denote items observed in separate sessions, over time. Longstops were classroom visits lasting at least 45 minutes, usually capturing an entire lesson or class period. Quickstops were 5-minute "pop in" classroom visits, meant to grab a brief glimpse of activity for that particular class session. Using the "pixel in the picture" analogy, these protocols provided a few pixels of data during each observation, which, over time, could be used to assemble a sketch of factors related to classroom teaching and learning occurring in the school. The following paragraphs provide more detail about these protocols.

Longstop Protocol (LSP)

The data collection instrument used during these LSP observations was the well-established Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol (MacIsaac, 2002; Piburn & Sawada, n.d.) with Social Justice supplement (RTOP+). The original RTOP was an instrument designed by the Evaluation Facilitation Group of the Arizona Collaborative for Excellence in the Preparation of Teachers (ACEPT) in 1999. The RTOP has been shown to be a valid and reliable instrument in measuring teacher practice over the past decade. The adapted instrument was tested by the Teaching for a New Era (TNE) project

in 2007 (Pedulla, Salomon-Fernandez, Miteseu, Jong, & Cochran-Smith 2007), and contained the items from the RTOP instrument with the addition of six items specifically related to teaching for social justice, thus receiving the name RTOP+.

The TNE project researchers reported, "The RTOP is an established standardized instrument with sound psychometric properties. The instrument developers report the rater reliability to be 0.95, indicating a very high level of consistency of ratings across raters. The RTOP also gives norm-referenced information about the extent of reformed teaching practice" (Pedulla, et al., 2007). Researchers chose the RTOP+ to document classroom practices so that evidence of teachers' negotiated professional development might be documented. Additionally, the open-ended response items in the RTOP+ provided data related to digital technology availability and use in the classrooms observed, as the researchers were also interested in the school's growth in the integration of classroom technologies. These responses served as data points related to school leaders' foci on inquiry-based learning, equity, and digital technology use.

The RTOP+ yields scale scores in six areas:
1. Lesson Design and Implementation
2. Content: Propositional knowledge
3. Content: Procedural Knowledge
4. Classroom Culture: Communicative Interactions
5. Classroom Culture: Student/Teacher Relationships
6. Teaching for Social Justice

Data on technology use and integration within these observed sessions were also captured with the RTOP+ through the descriptive and demographic information retrieved. The RTOP+ contains the directive:

Please describe any technology visible in the room (e.g., overhead projector, TV/ VCR, computers). Please describe the type and number of computers, if these machines are turned on, if they are being used and in what manner. Also note teacher use and student use of digital technologies throughout the lesson observation.

Notice how the language and the categories of the RTOP+ guide the observer to seek out specific examples and details of classroom interaction that would assist the educators in pinpointing elements related to issues of school culture, equity, and digital technology integration. These were key areas of emphasis for these University of Tübingen Germany and OECD, Paris particular researchers and leaders, so the LSP with the RTOP+ was a good fit for their classroom observational activities.

Quickstop Protocol (QSP)

Because the time commitment of the LSP RTOP+ was extensive, a 5-minute "quickstop" protocol (QSP) was also implemented to allow for more frequent (several times a week) visits into classrooms to quickly grab a snapshot of what type of instructional experiences were occurring. The QSP (See Appendix A) was created by the lead researcher for this particular project, whose interest in digital technology integration was paramount. Using the QSP, the observer was asked to categorize the type of learning

activity occurring (Teacher-centric, Inter-active, Group, Individual) and the types of digital technologies being employed in the learning activity. A space for additional notes is provided, but the check boxes facilitate a brief documentation of the experience. Because of the brevity of the QSP visits, it is necessary to complete a much larger number of these to gather enough data to make informed reflections about classroom practice. Coupled with the LSP, the data set can yield a rich amount of evidence to support conversations and decisions regarding meaningful teaching and learning reform in schools.

4. Impact for Educational Leaders

Many educational leaders and school principals are looking for tools and strategies that help them meet their goals of observing teaching in the classrooms of teachers they are working with. These strategies need to be variable to meet the complicated time schedules of the typical busy school and also to meet the needs of a leader who has many faculty working with them in a building.

At the same time it is important that these tools help observers focus their attention on key aspects of the teaching and learning process— the work of teachers and students.

5. Customizing Protocols to Target School Priorities

Educational leaders are able to locate a variety of observational protocols to assist with classroom visits. However, it is possible that no one instrument fits perfectly with a school's vision, mission and priorities. For this reason, effective educational leaders take the initiative to adapt and customize observation protocols to best match their school's focus.

In the example provided above (LSP and QSP), the research team added the paragraph on the RTOP+ about attending to the specific digital technologies being employed during a lesson, to remind the observer that this was a key focus for this school. The leaders, collaboratively with the teachers, had dedicated years of professional development related to digital technology integration, and they were all anxious to see how well they were doing in implementing digital technologies to support teaching and learning. Because this research occurred in an area that was somewhat marginalized because of economic disadvantages, the social justice focus of the "plus" (last 6 items) of the RTOP+ were also key components of interest to the school staff. With the information gathered from the LSP, combined with the data collected through the QSP observations, researchers were able to develop an analysis technique to generate a technology integration rating for each classroom. These ratings were then shared with individual teachers for conversation and reflection, as well as analyzed by school leaders to contemplate next steps in professional development and resource acquisition.

School leaders need to articulate the areas of classroom interaction and teacher strategies that are most important to them and modify existing protocols (or create their own observation protocols) that assist them in documenting those el-

ements. The QSP shared earlier was an instrument that was developed by the researcher, and vetted by the school staff, to focus on the area of digital technology integration. The RTOP+ (LSP) has 6 different areas of emphasis, but a school could certainly decide to only use one section of the protocol. Data collection in the classroom is an evolutionary process, so as protocols are used, educational administrators will learn which items and instruments yield productive information, and which do not. Continuing to adapt protocols, with teacher feedback, will strengthen the usability of the data sets over time. Such data sets better inform our understanding of evidence-based instructional practices (EBIP) which also continues to develop and evolve.

6. Putting the Data to Work

Since the main focus of engaging in regular classroom visits should be school improvement, it is imperative that school leaders dedicate time and effort to use the data collected. As indicated earlier in this article, if a climate of collegiality and trust has been nurtured, sharing data with teachers, individually and collectively, will flow naturally. Inviting teachers to participate in the analysis and "sense-making" of the data is a stimulating way to explore the themes of teaching and learning, in their personal context. School administrators do need to strategically plan time for these conversations to occur, and encourage an honest, but productive dialogue. A result of such work should be identified areas of success and identified areas to of improvement. Celebrating evidence that indicates exemplary

teaching and learning practices is a powerful way to build community across the school staff. In addition, articulating specific areas that need improvement (related to school initiatives and priorities) and creating action plans to accomplish these goals demonstrates commitment to utilize the data gleaned from classroom visits.

Conclusion

As schools continue to fine tune the strategies and means of increasing student learning it has never been clearer that educational leaders need to be in the rooms and spaces where teaching is happening. Whether stopping in a room for a few minutes to check on a particular teachers use of a questioning technique, or stopping to watch a teacher conduct an entire lesson focused on a difficult to teach topic identified by analyzing formative assessment data the school has collected, teacher observations matter.

More importantly, these observations can be collaborative, improvement-focused, a natural part of the milieu of school. They can be part of the developmental improvement strategies of the school. By forming groups of teachers who can observe each other or work with the principal to observe a particular set of strategies across the school relationships focused on improvement emerge. By utilizing different modes of observations—longstops using tools such as RTOP+ and short stops using tools such as the QSP, a significant number of data points begin to help the school create an image of itself.

Forms of observation continue to evolve. It is important that they become contextualized for the particular setting in

which they are getting used, educational leaders will have more and more ways of stepping in to the classroom, watching the aha moments of new student understandings, and developing the collegial culture of watching. Educational leaders need to develop what Senge (2006) has called systems leadership. Leaders working to develop systems leadership look around the school and look around the classrooms in it. They ask themselves how is this environment functioning? Where does it appear to be headed?

Teaching and learning are social acts. Teaching and learning is best when it occurs in the natural interactions between someone who knows something and someone who wants to know something, even better when both know a bit of something to add to a great whole. Watching these moments moves us from pixels to picture, from assumptions to data-based findings, from hidden behind the doors of a classroom to out in the open and open to growth. A picture of the future we can build through our observations and our actions.

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Appendix A
Quickstop Data Collection Instrument
Classroom Tech Inquiry Quick-Stop Protocols
Room (#/teacher)_____Date:_____
Content Area: _____Time:_____
Current Activity:
☐ Teacher-Centric (one-way lecture)
☐ Interactive (teacher/student exchange)
☐ Group (student small group work)
☐ Individual
Technology in Use (check all that apply):
     ☐ Classroom projection system
          ☐ PowerPoint
          ☐ Website
          ☐ Word
          ☐ Excel
          ☐ Inspiration
          ☐ Video (US? Other?)

     _____
     ☐ SmartBoard   list content area _____
     ☐ Student Computers
     ☐ Turned on
          ☐ Students using workstations   number of students _____
               ☐ individually ☐ in groups
     ☐ Laptop Cart   number of students _____
               ☐ individually ☐ in groups
Applications/activities at student computers
     ☐ PowerPoint
     ☐ Website
     ☐ Word
     ☐ Excel
     ☐ Inspiration
     ☐ Other _____
          ☐ Digital Tech Peripherals
     ☐ Digital Cameras
     ☐ Graphing Calculators
     ☐ Classroom Response (clickers)
     ☐ Other _____
Additional Notes: _____
_____
Documenter: _____