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aged 10 to 14

# Matters

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## Classroom Observations: Reducing Tensions and Enhancing Teacher Practice

*Many of the tensions associated with classroom observations result from lack of communication and collaboration.*

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We have all been there: Butterflies in our stomachs and lesson plans in hand, anticipating a formal observation by our principal. Experienced, excellent teachers may have a moment of self-doubt: “OK, I’ve taught for 20 years, but now somebody is watching me do it with evaluation and judgment in mind.” Even teachers who are quite comfortable with being observed, never breaking a sweat when an administrator walks into the classroom, may wonder how this process actually helps them to become better teachers and how it benefits their students.

State and district policies require principals to evaluate teachers. As a result, teachers and administrators often equate the word “observation” with “evaluation.” And with that comes all the apprehension associated with judgments that affect summative ratings of performance, tenure, merit pay, and status.

Although information from observations must inform summative ratings of teachers’ performance, observations also should be focused on teaching and learning from a formative stance, providing teachers with opportunities to share, discuss, and reflect on their practice. Administrators have to strike a balance between conducting an evaluation and providing meaningful support.

The observation process should lead to benefits for everyone. Principals become stronger instructional leaders with frequent and purposeful visits to classrooms. Teachers enhance their practice when given constructive and appropriate feedback from an observer. Students benefit from those enhancements in teacher practice and from the direct evidence that administrators and teachers devote time and energy to improving students’ educational experiences. Ultimately, observations should lead to opportunities for collaboration focused on enhancing

student learning and educators’ job satisfaction.

The benefits of classroom observations seem logical and desirable. Why, then, are those benefits so difficult to attain? Numerous factors or “tensions” can impede the observation process, making it feel judgmental and less than collegial. So, what can administrators and teachers do to alleviate the anxiety associated with observations? How can observations be learning experiences for everyone?

### Common Sources of Tension

One source of tension occurs when teachers and administrators do not share a common definition of *good teaching*.

- What does good teaching look like?
- How do you know it when you see it? Or, more importantly, when you don’t?
- What qualifies as good teaching?

There are several characteristics of good teaching. For example, good teaching features relevant and meaningful curriculum and a variety of appropriate instructional strategies and assessment methods. Learner-centered instruction and inquiry-based learning also characterize good teaching. In classrooms where good teaching takes place, students exhibit higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.

Evidence of a positive and productive learning community is further indication of good teaching. Administrators observing such classroom communities will notice student leadership and decision-making, the exchange of respectful and caring words and actions, and meaningful relationships among students and between students and teachers.

Another source of tension is the hierarchical structure associated with many classroom observations. More often than not, the person responsible for conducting the observation is in a supervisory position, such as a principal, an assistant principal, or an instructional lead teacher. Even if the observation is not intended to be evaluative, it can *feel* evaluative because of the differences in power that are held or perceived. Observations can feel more evaluative than supportive when the observer and the person to be observed cannot find the time, in the hectic daily life of the school, to collaborate with each other regarding the observation.

Differing beliefs about effective classroom management also can lead to observation tensions. What does a well-run classroom look like? Are students quietly reading or writing at their desks? Are they out of their seats, talking excitedly with one another? Is the teacher standing in front of the room instructing students, or in the back working with a small group of students while other students help one another in their own groups? Does the teacher remind students of rules and procedures, or do they monitor their own behavior? Are students sitting at desks or lying on the floor?

Depending on the goals of the lesson and the outcomes expected, all of the above may be present in a well-run classroom. When the administrator is familiar with the teacher's classroom management style prior to the observation, misunderstandings are less likely to occur. The administrator will know that what might appear to be off-task student behavior to a casual observer is actually meaningful, engaged learning in *this* teacher's classroom.

### Discussions and Decisions Related to Observations

Together, teachers and administrators can use purposeful, targeted discussions to make collaborative decisions that will address many of the tensions often associated with observations. Improving instruction should be the goal of all observations, although the discussions and decisions tied to formal observations will, by definition, be different from those connected to informal observations.

Formal observations are announced, opening up opportunities for conversations beforehand. A pre-observation conference allows for a vital discussion to prepare the observer and the teacher for the actual observation. Pre-observation discussions should address the learning environment, the learning outcomes or objectives for the lesson to be observed, and a focus for the observation (Zepeda, 2007).

Teachers should describe the learning environment in detail, including the learners themselves (e.g., knowledge, skills, and interests relevant to the class), their relationships and commu-

nication with one another and with the teacher, and procedures and routines. The conversation should also address what the students will be learning (curriculum), how the teaching and learning will occur (instruction), and the demonstration of learning the teacher will expect as an indicator of success in meeting the learning objectives (assessment).

The most critical decision made in the pre-observation discussion is the identification of a focus area or areas for the observation. What does the teacher want the observer to examine most intently? What information (data) would be most useful? Classrooms are complex environments with multiple layers of potential data sources, including everything from furniture arrangement and lighting to language used in interactions with students and recognition of student understanding or misunderstanding.

During an observation, even with identified focus areas, observers can face sensory overload. Paying attention to one aspect of classroom life means not paying attention to many others. Choosing an observation tool helps narrow the field of vision, and sharing that observation tool with the teacher ahead of time takes the mystery out of the clipboard's contents and the object of the scribbled notes.

Zepeda (2007) lists several different data collection methods, including:

- Analyzing certain teacher behaviors (e.g., questioning techniques);
- Diagramming the classroom and noting patterns of movement and interactions;
- Selecting some aspects of the teacher's and/or students' dialog to transcribe verbatim;
- Writing an open narrative that captures a series of events, actions, teacher or student comments or both, with or without times noted in the margins (e.g., routines, instructional strategies, assessment methods); and
- Completing checklists that can include tallies of certain teacher and student behaviors, such as which students or groups are called on most often.

To promote teachers' reflection and to influence planning, observation data must make sense of a complicated puzzle. The focus areas determined in the pre-observation conference guide decisions about how to collect data during the observation and how to make sense of that data during the post-observation conference.

### The Post-Observation Conference

Post-observation conferences provide opportunities to talk about the patterns that emerged from the observation and to acknowledge the successes—and the food for thought—that

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those patterns represent. The nature and tone of the post-observation discussion dictate the impact of the feedback. Data presented neutrally, without direct or implied judgment and qualifications, will be accepted as evidence. Editorial comments, on the other hand, often encourage teachers to be defensive, justifying their choices instead of looking for gaps and taking advantage of those gaps to improve teaching and learning.

Although informal observations obviously represent much less structured opportunities to observe teachers and students, these shorter and more frequent observations serve as prerequisites for formal observations. An observer without any background knowledge of the teacher and students steps into a classroom like a naive visitor to a foreign land, unaware of the local customs and expectations.

As part of developing a culture of trust and openness to feedback, administrators should informally observe all teachers, not just the rookies or those who are struggling. Informal observations should occur as frequently as possible, since each visit engenders familiarity and a growing level of comfort with the presence of an observer.

A couple of caveats should guide both formal and informal observations. First, on a basic level, those doing the observing should look engaged and attentive, with body language that indicates enjoyment rather than evaluation. And, in line with reducing anxiety, follow-up activity should happen within 24 to 48 hours, whether that is limited to a brief conversation or e-mail, in the case of an informal observation, or the more extensive and structured post-observation conference associated with formal observations.

## Conclusion

Many of the tensions associated with observations result from lack of communication and collaboration. What is defined as *good* teaching and who defines it? What is the purpose of the observation? How will the results be used?

A pre-conference held prior to an observation provides an opportunity for the teacher and administrator to discuss and decide what will be the focus of the observation. Deciding collaboratively on a focus allows the observer to target specific aspects of teacher and/or student behaviors rather than casting a wide net for any and all behaviors and interactions that occur in the classroom. The pre-conference also is a good time to define good teaching, so that both the teacher and the observer have a clear and common understanding of what to expect and what is expected. During a post-observation conference, the teacher and administrator collaborate on ways to act upon what they have learned from the classroom observation.

Teachers make hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions each day and those decisions dictate what happens in the classroom. Effective observations should inform those decisions to the benefit of teachers, students, and administrators.

## Reference

Zepeda, S. (2007). *Instructional supervision: Applying tools and concepts* (2nd ed.). Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

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