Developing Reflective Practice Through Snapshots of Teaching and Learning

The classroom walkthrough provides principals with valuable information about teaching and learning within the building and district.

by Kathy Larson

The principal holds a specially designed 3-by-5 card in her hand as she enters the room. She moves toward the back of the room, jotting written information on the card. She identifies the teaching objective, level of thinking asked of the students, and the strategic use of images on the walls that support the learning tasks. The principal takes a few more notes and leaves the room after only three minutes. Afterward, she’ll analyze the data and determine what type of feedback to deliver.

“I’m able to get into every classroom in my building once a week. My staff loves it, and so do I. Classroom walkthroughs have energized my relationships with the staff,” says one elementary school principal of 15 years. The classroom walkthrough procedure provides principals with valuable information about teaching and learning within the building and district, and it is quickly becoming the answer to the question: How can I make classroom visits meaningful, substantive catalysts for professional growth?

What Is a Classroom Walkthrough?

A classroom walkthrough is a focused classroom visit. It usually takes no longer than four minutes and is followed by reflection. During the three- to four-minute visit, principals use their trained eyes to snap a wide-angle picture of seven essential teaching and learning elements. Over time, the “snapshots” form a building (or district) album that creates a story of the system’s ability to do what it is charged to do: teach students what they need to know and instruct them for best learning results.

Conducting classroom walkthroughs is an efficient way to gather systemwide data in a very short amount of time. Principals witness the “what” (curriculum) and the “how” (instruction) from each classroom to determine how well the system is meeting its expectation for student learning results.

A curriculum-focused lens answers the “what to teach” questions:

- What is the purpose of the lesson and the learning expectation?
- Is the lesson based on grade-level targets, standards, and benchmarks?
- Does the lesson ask higher-order thinking and problem-solving questions?
- What is the quality of the texts and materials being used?

The instruction-focused lens answers the “how to teach” questions:

- What instructional strategies are used?
- What is the level of student and classroom engagement?
- How does the classroom strategically support learning the curriculum?

During each walkthrough, the principal jots down information on a specially designed 3-by-5 card that answers each of the seven questions. The principal only records what is seen and heard during the walkthrough. Data must be objective and nonjudgmental—evidence is either apparent, or not. Ambiguity or assumptions are not recorded.

Given the time frame of three to four minutes, the principal can visit as many as 10 to 20 classrooms in one day, gathering abundant amounts of data regarding how the teaching in the system is implementing the curriculum and instruction.
After the Walkthrough

As the principal returns from the walkthroughs, each “snapshot” is analyzed based on the seven questions. Over time, the walkthroughs tell a story about what is happening in every classroom in the building. The data can be analyzed at an individual classroom level or combined for grade level, content level, or data regarding the whole school. This information informs the leader of the strengths of the instructional system and the areas that require more reflection and information from teachers.

Reflecting on Classroom Walkthroughs

Reflection is a key component of classroom walkthroughs. It is the catalyst for teachers to critically think about essential content (curriculum) and to strategically determine the best ways to teach content using research-based methodology (instruction). The critical alignment of curriculum and instruction becomes the focus of individual, group, and whole-school reflection.

Over time, and in as little as four weeks, patterns emerge from the data that indicate strengths of the system and areas of needed change. The principal can fill in quantitative gaps of data with descriptive data like reflective dialogue with individuals, departments, grade-level teams, or the entire school faculty. Responses from reflective questions provide needed information for timely improvements and meaningful professional growth experiences.

When teachers are given an opportunity to reflect and dialogue on critical issues related to curriculum and instruction, they are also equipped to diagnose system issues and identify strategies to enhance their performance.

“Classroom walkthroughs provided a valuable tool to track our literacy initiative efforts by going into all the classrooms in our district. Once a month, our administrative team shares the data we collect and creates reflective questions to present to our faculty. We collate the answers to our questions, and often we can bring ‘just in time’ professional growth activities so teachers can dig deeper into literacy strategies,” observed a director of curriculum and instruction.

Guidelines for Using Reflective Feedback

Reflection is a key result of the walkthrough. The intent of classroom walkthroughs is to create a community of critical thinkers and problem-solvers for system analysis and improvements.

There are several types of categories of reflection:

- Reflection to build community trust;
- Reflection on articulating the teaching purpose;
- Reflection on targeting grade level;
- Reflection on planning the students’ thinking level;
- Reflection on selecting texts and materials;
- Reflection on determining instructional strategies;
- Reflection on soliciting the type of learner engagement; and
- Reflection on strategically designing the learning environment.

The principal selects the type of reflection that correlates with the data so that teachers can provide information to strengthen or change their instructional practices. The principal models the type of reflection required to meet this purpose and expects teachers to ask themselves, and each other, the reflective questions needed to continually assess the work they do. The leadership provides the necessary tools to make that happen.

Classroom Walkthroughs Evaluate the System Not the People

How do we know how well the system operates on a daily basis? This question is answered through gathering weekly data in every classroom. The principal witnesses how the system
fulfills its mission for teaching and learning. Classroom walkthroughs are used to evaluate the process not the people. In this way, walkthroughs support the basic principles of quality improvement by:

- Focusing on the work process, issue, or behavior, not on the person;
- Maintaining the self-confidence and self-esteem of others;
- Maintaining strong partnerships of those inside and outside the system;
- Taking the initiative to improve work processes and partnerships; and
- Leading by example (Zenger, Fokman, and Zenger 2004).

Classroom Walkthroughs for Mentors, Curriculum Leaders, and Teacher Leaders

Classroom walkthroughs benefit other types of leaders in a system. For example, mentors often cannot find the time to visit the classrooms of their beginning teachers and walkthroughs afford them the opportunity to focus on the aspects of teaching and learning that are essential for any new inductee.

Many districts have trained their curriculum department chairs, teacher leaders, and curriculum leaders with the skills to complete walkthrough assessments. These individuals then deliver reflection to ensure new initiatives are implemented, existing curriculum is refined and revised, and a continuous dialogue reflects on the purpose of education.

Initiating Classroom Walkthroughs

There are six key steps to conducting classroom walkthroughs:

- **Inform the faculty.** Prior to initiating classroom walkthroughs, inform the faculty about its purpose and expectations. Use, for example, a PowerPoint presentation to explain the importance of gathering information based on the seven elements. Encourage teachers to discuss the alignment of curriculum and instruction and why assessing that alignment is an essential part of the school and district mission and the charge of instructional leaders.

- **Develop district guidelines.** It is critical that district support is maintained and sustained. Efforts to use classroom walkthroughs endure over time when the administrative team uses the approach and the data to improve the system.

- **Schedule blocks of time for coaching prior to full implementation.** In keeping with best practices for professional growth, principals should begin to use the approach after the initial training.

- **Inform teachers and others who may be influenced by this approach.** Teachers must be given time to talk about how the process is working. Teacher feedback maintains the integrity of the approach and keeps levels of trust in the school community high.

- **Stay true to the fidelity of the training.** The principal should stay in the classroom no longer than the agreed designated time. Deviations affect the integrity of the process and create elements of distrust among the staff.

- **Develop learning communities that will reflect and act.** Reflection should be used strategically among the staff to encourage self-sustaining problem-solvers.

Reference


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<th>On the Same Page</th>
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<tr>
<td>Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. To what degree would classroom walkthroughs energize teachers in our school?</td>
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<td>2. What are some of the obstacles to using classroom walkthroughs in our school?</td>
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<td>3. What steps might we take to help all faculty members embrace the idea of classroom walkthroughs?</td>
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<td>4. In addition to the seven advanced by the author, what walkthrough lenses might be useful for us to use at our school?</td>
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<td>5. To what degree would you feel comfortable with our school improvement team or other teacher leaders conducting classroom walkthroughs?</td>
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<td>6. Why might classroom walkthroughs provide school leaders with a more accurate picture of teaching and learning than our current observation system?</td>
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—Created by Stephen Gould, who is co-director of the National School Leaders’ Network (NSLN), a leadership coach in private practice, and a consultant for the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL). He has more than 30 years experience as an elementary school principal and assistant superintendent.