Observations of Teachers & Effective Feedback Processes for Schools and Early Childhood Education Services

Why formal observations are important

“Teachers are among the most powerful influences in learning” (Hattie, 2012, p.22). High-quality teaching across early childhood education and schools has substantial long-term benefits and can offset disadvantages that stem from low socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., Basham, 2012; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain 2005). On the other hand, the accumulated impact of poor-quality teaching can result in educational disadvantage and failure for learners, which is largely irreversible (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Not only are there significant social and economic costs for individuals who do not do well at school, there are also significant social and economic costs for society (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Belfield and Levin, 2007; Moretti, 2007; Muenning, 2007; OECD, 2013; Orfield, 2004; Wylie, 2011).

Jensen (2014) concluded that “improving teacher effectiveness outweighs the impact of any other school education program or policy in improving student performance” (p.5). Numerous other studies strongly support the importance of focusing on improving teacher effectiveness in order to enhance educational outcomes (e.g., the findings of the meta-analysis synthesis undertaken by Hattie, 2009, 2012; Hattie & Yates, 2014). While evidence of teacher effectiveness can be found in student achievement results, such information provides few clues as to what a teacher is doing to contribute to these outcomes and how that teacher might improve his or her teaching to further enhance student achievement (Kane, 2012).

For teachers to improve their teaching, they need to be able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses clearly and recognise where they need to improve their knowledge and skills (Kane, 2012). However, relying solely on teacher self-assessment is insufficient or potentially problematic. Some studies have found very little correlation between teachers’ self-report assessments of their teaching and their practices (e.g., Spillane & Zeuli, 1999; Stecher, Le et al., 2006, cited in Kaufman & Junker, 2011). Furthermore, “because classrooms are such busy places, with many different activities happening at the same time, much of what is really happening in that classroom for the most part actually remains unknown to the teacher (Richards and Lockhart, 2004)” (cited in Farell, 2011, p.265).

If such observations are undertaken effectively, they allow teachers to see things in ways that they are unlikely to have the opportunity to see otherwise (Khachatryan, 2015), and thus help teachers direct their efforts into improving their practices. When teachers are truly reflective, they must subject their own teaching beliefs and practices to critical examination (Farell, 2011). While effective observations are not the only way teachers can do this, observations do have an important role to play in contributing to the shared goal of making a difference in the lives of children (Guss, Norris, Horm, Monroe, & Wolfe, 2013).
Practical matters to consider when undertaking observations

Below are a series of important points noted in the research literature that warrant consideration.

- It is recommended that a sound appraisal process should include at least two or three annual classroom observations (Whitehurst, Chingos & Lindquist, 2015). However, if these observations do not generate meaningful and useful feedback, they can simply become a compliance exercise and lose value (The New Teacher Project, 2013).
- Rather than focusing on the teaching practice, it is important to assess what students are being asked to accomplish and to demonstrate in the classroom (The New Teacher Project, 2013). It is vital during an observation to give priority to those aspects that have the greatest impact on student achievement (The New Teacher Project, 2011).
- When undertaking an observation the teaching context and the characteristics of the learners need to be taken into consideration (Jones & Brownell, 2014). Different content and different groups of learners require teachers to exhibit different skills, so a teacher’s practice will vary from lesson to lesson (Kane, 2012).
- It is important to reassure teachers that observers realise that no day is perfect, even when teachers are doing all the right things (Guss et al., 2013).
- If observations are the sole basis for teacher appraisal, they may stifle innovation, and force teachers to conform to particular notions of “effective practice” (Kane, 2012). In light of this concern, Kane (2012) argues that it is vital to have multiple measures and perspectives of teachers’ classroom practice to reduce to risk of unintended consequences. He strongly recommends that classroom observation data should be examined alongside the information generated from well-designed student surveys. He and his colleagues found that the results from surveys undertaken by 44,500 students were consistent across classrooms and predictive of student achievement gains.
- Based on the results of their large scale study, Ho and Kane (2013) recommend that teachers receive prior notification about being observed. They found that prior notification lessened the sense of an observation being primarily for accountability purposes. Furthermore, they found that prior notification did not diminish the differences in practices between teachers who were notified, and between those who were not notified.
- An observer is likely to have preconceived ideas about a teacher’s effectiveness, resulting in an unintended tendency to note evidence that affirms those preconceptions (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Lindquist, 2015). Additionally, initial impressions linger and can influence subsequent observations (Ho & Kane, 2013).
- There is another area of potential bias in classroom observations that needs to be recognised. In a study in which teachers were scored at the end of a formal observation using standardised observation tools, researchers found that when observers saw a teacher teaching a class of higher-ability students, they judged the teacher to be better than when they saw that same teacher teaching a class of lower-ability students (Whitehurst, Chingos & Lindquist, 2015). In light of these findings the authors argue that observations can potentially disadvantage teachers who are assigned lower achieving and less-prepared students.
- It is recommended that observations are carried out by more than one person. This increases the degree of reliability over time and helps to counteract any bias or preconceptions (Ho & Kane, 2013).
Feedback

“The main reason to conduct classroom observations is to generate actionable feedback for improving practice” (Kane, 2012, p.40). However, researchers in the United States found in many of the districts from which they were gathering data, principals and other observers struggled to provide specific, high-quality and useful feedback based on what they saw in a teacher’s classroom, much less provide feedback that could help teachers improve (The New Teacher Project, 2013). If teachers do not find the feedback they receive to be meaningful and useful they will not change their practices (Khachatryan, 2015).

From a review of 141 studies, Shute (2008) concluded that feedback is more likely to lead to improvements if it:

- focuses on the task and the steps needed to perform a task, not on personal characteristics
- is sufficiently detailed to ensure it is useful
- contains clear and specific messages about the teaching practices and how any aspects of those differ from what is expected
- is unbiased and objective
- is presented in manageable units

Guss, Norris, Horm, Monroe, and Wolfe (2013), researching in an early childhood education context also make a number of other important points regarding feedback relevant also to schooling:

- Results should be shared in a way that explains the specifics of what was observed without projecting judgment about the attitudes, knowledge, or competence of the teachers. If teachers feel they are being judged harshly, such judgments can thwart their sense of competence, lessen the likelihood they will internalise the feedback they receive, and jeopardize the on-going relationship between them and their observer.
- Both teachers and observers need to take responsibility for ongoing, meaningful communication. “With power differentials, perceived or real, it is important to design mechanisms that enable the free bidirectional flow of communication – both negative and positive information” (p. 13).
- The simple act of sharing feedback will not magically lead to changes. Follow-up discussions and support are required to help the teacher internalise the feedback and make changes to their practices.
- When sharing feedback observers need to prioritise what is important, as the quantity of feedback can sometimes be overwhelming and lead to paralysis.
- It takes time for the feedback to be implemented. It is an iterative process that can involve both successes and setbacks along the way.
- It may be helpful for more senior staff members to share how they use feedback to inform their practice.

In addition, Khachatryan (2015) highlights other points worth noting.
• It is important that there is clarity for the teacher around the feedback, its implications, what the teacher needs to do to improve and why the observer considers some practices effective or ineffective. Research has found that a lack of clarity is a widespread issue amongst teachers.
• Feedback can also validate and affirm the multitude of pedagogical decisions teachers make. Such feedback may also have the effect of motivating teachers to work harder in other areas identified as needing improvement.
• It is important to consider how much change should be expected from a teacher based on feedback. What is expected must be manageable and realistic.
• Ultimately feedback must increase motivation or cause learning within the recipient in order for it to increase effects on future performance.

Models of observation and written feedback

The Council recognises that there are a range of observation and feedback models such as ‘Positive and Advice’, time sampling and recording of interaction patterns. It is important that whichever model you use meets the needs of learner (teachers, children and students) in your setting and follows the principles of effective observation and feedback described in these materials.

References


Kane, T. (Fall 2012). Capturing the dimensions of effective teaching. *Education Next, 35*-41.


