

Classroom walkthroughs: Learning to see the trees and the forest

By Howard Pitler with Bryan Goodwin

For some, the practice of classroom “walkthroughs,” where principals or other instructional leaders spend only minutes observing classrooms to form an impression about the quality of teaching and learning occurring in them seems preposterous. But consider the study Malcolm Gladwell describes in the introduction to his book, *Blink*.

After watching just two seconds of soundless video clips of Harvard professors they’d never seen teaching a class, students rated how effective they thought the professors would be as instructors. The researchers were surprised to find that not only did the students find the task easy, but their instantaneous impressions were highly correlated with end-of-the-semester ratings by those who actually took the classes.¹ So, if college students can accurately assess the quality of professors from just two silent seconds of video, can principals assess the quality of a teachers’ instruction after only a few minutes? Maybe, but short observations also can be badly flawed.

The key to making accurate decisions based on short observations is knowing what to look for. For example, Gladwell notes that when emergency room doctors and nurses in the Cook County Hospital reduced their lengthy interview protocol for chest-pain patients down to a

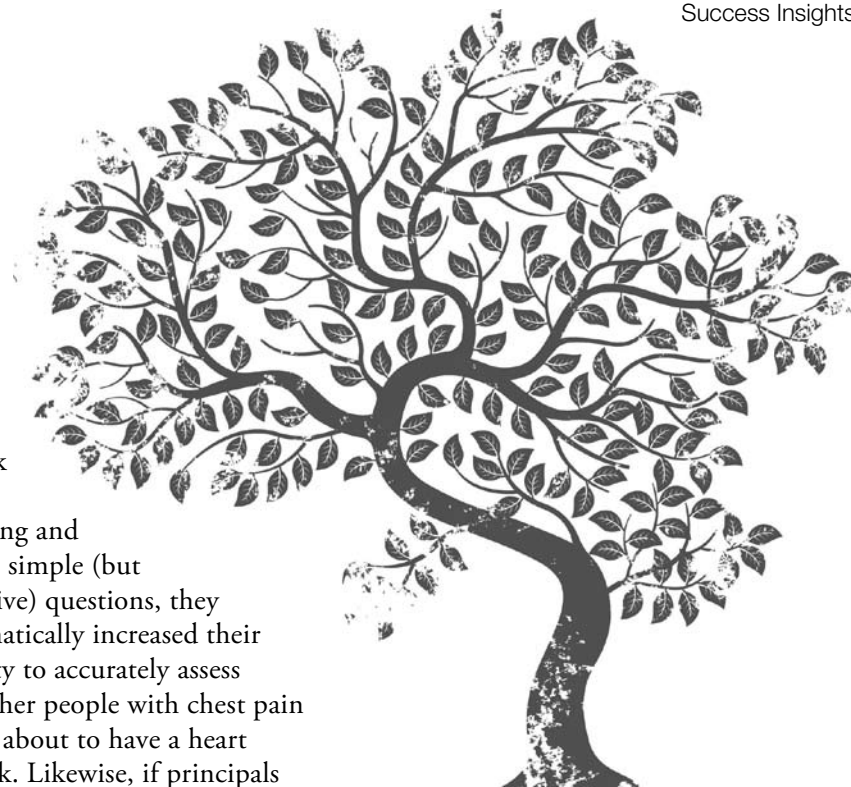
quick EKG reading and three simple (but incisive) questions, they dramatically increased their ability to accurately assess whether people with chest pain were about to have a heart attack. Likewise, if principals don’t know what to look for or misunderstand the purposes of walkthroughs, their observations can be useless, or worse, harmful to teachers and students. But if they are equipped with the right set of “look fors” and a clear understanding of purposes, brief classroom observations can, in fact, be powerful tools for promoting great teaching.

What to look for

Principals should ask these six questions when observing classrooms:

1. Are teachers using research-based teaching strategies?

One of the most important things to look for is teachers’ use of instructional strategies. The nine strategies from McREL’s ASCD publication, *Classroom Instruction that Works*, for example, can serve as a framework for determining the extent to which teachers use research-based strategies. Although there’s no single “right way” to



teach, great teachers employ a variety of teaching strategies, understand the instructional purposes of each, and use each strategy intentionally. So, when observing classrooms, principals should look at strategies teachers are using, and during a follow-up coaching conversation, teachers should be able to articulate why they used a particular strategy.

2. Do student grouping patterns support learning?

One of the nine categories of effective instruction in *Classroom Instruction that Works* is “cooperative learning,” which includes supporting student learning through large groups, small groups, pairs, cooperative groups (small groups with assigned roles for each member), or working individually. None of these grouping strategies are “wrong”; they may all be appropriate at different times and

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¹Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

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for different learning purposes. Again, the key is to determine whether teachers are intentional in their use of grouping patterns. During follow-up coaching sessions, can teachers state why they selected a particular grouping strategy?

3. Are teachers and students using technology to support student learning?

While educational technology is more prevalent in today's

classrooms, many teachers still do not put these tools to best use. During walkthroughs, principals should note the technology teachers are using and how they're using it. As before, principals should specifically ask about the pedagogical or learning purpose the teacher intended by using the selected technology. It also is important to monitor if and how students are using technology. Principals should ask about students' opportunities for "fingers on keyboard" time to use technology to deepen their learning.

4. Do students understand their goals for learning?

While conducting walkthroughs, principals should do more than go through a checklist of teacher practices; they also should observe what students are doing and learning. When asked, are students able to articulate what they are doing as it relates to their learning goals? Are students making a connection to true learning objectives, or are they completely focused on activities? Over time, student responses will provide an indication of how well teachers are communicating learning goals and whether students are engaged and intentional about their own learning.

5. Are students learning both basic and higher order levels of knowledge?

Classroom observations also should reveal whether students are engaged in learning at the lower rungs of Bloom's taxonomy (e.g., remembering, understanding, and applying) or at the higher levels, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. All of these forms

of learning are necessary and appropriate in different contexts. However, if the vast majority of student learning is concentrated on lower level learning, principals should initiate conversations with teachers regarding the levels of student learning they observed.

6. Do student achievement data correlate with walkthrough data?

Principals should also observe classrooms through the lens of student achievement data. In *It's Being Done*, Chenoweth provides the following anecdote of how Sheri Shirley, principal of Oakland Heights Elementary School in Russellville, Arkansas, uses classroom observations to help her high-poverty school raise student achievement:

Shirley spends a great deal of time in classrooms herself, watching for effective teaching methods that can be shared. In one instance, she knew that the children in one classroom were mastering many more "sight" words (words read automatically without having to laboriously spell them out) than in others ... she noticed that in the less-successful classrooms, if the children missed a flashcard word, the teachers would simply read the words to the children. In the more-successful classroom, any time the children missed a word, the teacher would teach them a "trick" to read the word more quickly. She might point out, for example, that there was a "word within the word" that children already knew (stAND). That simple practice on the part of the teacher was helping kids read better, and by noticing, Shirley was then able to initiate conversations among

Research-based responsibilities of effective school leaders that can be fulfilled through classroom walkthroughs:

- Connecting with teachers and staff on a personal and professional level (the responsibility of relationships)
- Encouraging teachers to use research on instruction (the responsibility of intellectual stimulation)
- Reviewing formative achievement data and using it to inform instructional practices (the responsibility of involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment)
- Assessing the quality, fidelity, and consistency of instructional practices to determine staff development needs (the responsibility of monitor/evaluate)
- Praising teachers with exemplary practices (the responsibility of contingent rewards)
- Communicating the belief that individual teachers can accomplish school goals (the responsibility of ideals and beliefs)
- Interpreting disappointing results or implementation challenges in ways that inspire hope and resilience (the responsibility of optimize)
- Soliciting feedback, both good and bad, and advice on improvement initiatives (the responsibility of input)
- Uncovering staff concerns and modifying leadership behaviors accordingly (the responsibility of flexibility).

Adapted from Waters, T. J., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. M. (2005). *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

*teachers about effective teaching practices.*²

As this example illustrates, when principals place their classroom observations within the context of student achievement data, they can dramatically increase the acuity of their observations and identify ways to improve teaching and learning.

How to use walkthrough data

A number of misconceptions persist about how to use the data generated from classroom walkthroughs. Indeed, some teachers' resistance to walkthroughs is likely due to the fact they or their principals—or both—are unclear about how to use their observation data.

Coaching, not evaluating

For starters, the purpose of a walkthrough is not to pass judgment on teachers, but to coach them to higher levels of performance. Walkthroughs are *not* teacher evaluations; they are a method for identifying opportunities for improvement and supporting the sharing of best practices across the school.

Measuring the impact of staff development efforts

In its best use, the walkthrough process will provide strong data to schools and districts regarding the extent to which their professional development initiatives are actually making it into the classroom. If a district's focus is in differentiated learning, for example, and the data indicate that an overwhelming percentage of observations show students are working only in whole group settings with each student doing exactly the same type of

work, there would be an apparent disconnect between the intent of the professional development and actual classroom practice. By systematically collecting and analyzing data from classroom observations, school leaders can determine whether staff development efforts are making a difference and guide real-time adjustments to the professional development they are offering teachers.

Supporting professional learning communities with walkthrough data

Savvy principals also understand the power of sharing their aggregated observation data with school staff to support professional learning communities. For example, one elementary school we worked with in Montana discovered through walkthrough data collected over a three-month period that teachers taught students in a whole-group setting in 67 percent of all observations. Through conversation with the staff and professional development on learning context, that number decreased from 67 percent to 56 percent during the following three months.

Final thoughts: Viewing the “mosaic”

As the success of this school illustrates, one of the most powerful aspects of walkthroughs is aggregating data across teachers and over time. One or two, or even 10 observations of an individual teacher, do not provide a clear picture of the quality of instruction within a school. But 10 visits each to 40 teachers' classrooms does

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provide a more accurate picture. Think of it as a mosaic. Looking at one tile in isolation tells you almost nothing. But when you see 400 of those tiles laid out in an orderly manner, a picture begins to emerge.

So too, with classroom walkthroughs: when principals understand what to look for and the purposes of their observations, they are able to pull together their brief *Blink*-like observations into a more complete picture of the quality—and variations in the quality—of instruction occurring in their buildings. In short, the power of walkthroughs lies not only in seeing the trees, but also the forest.

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²Chenoweth, K. (2007). *It's being done: Academic success in unexpected schools*. Harvard Education Press: Cambridge, Mass. (p. 44).