TEACHING LEARNING WALKS

Walk, Talk and Learn Together

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"Classrooms Count"

Collaborative Learning: Intentional Walking, Observing and Sharing in the Next Normal

Introduction

This monograph explores the purpose and focus of intentional observations of learning, across a school, schools and/or school system. These are also known as *Teaching and Learning Walks* (TLW). Their purpose is to build capacity in terms of strategies, skills and content, since as OECD has noted, the quality of learning is only as good as the quality of the teachers and school leaders[1]. Increasingly, school and system leaders are recognized as key to improvement and change[2]. They integrate "external and internal accountability" systems by supporting their teaching staff in aligning instruction with agreed teaching goals and performance standards." (Schleicher, 2015:19) The Wallace Foundation's recent meta-analysis concludes that principals do matter in terms (Grissom, Egalite, Lindsay, 2021). Intentional collaborative pedagogical observations that include walking, talking, sharing and learning become a lever for improvement aligning the goals to classroom learning.

We acknowledge, "Education is now recognized as one of the critical drivers for social and economic change" (Grose & Freedman, 2014: 34). What does improving learning involve? In the World Bank's '*Learning to Realize Education's Promise*', the researchers promote three pathways to improvement:

- Assess learning in multiple ways including gathering evidence of learning from observations conversations, products including well-designed formative assessments,
- Act on evidence of learning and use the data from multiple sets to make evidence informed decisions,
- Align actors[3] for collective and coherent efficacy[4].

Learning: How Do We Know It Is Happening?

How do we measure learning? What are the metrics? One of the data sets education leaders need to understand are the actual teaching/learning practices taking place in their schools. (Safir & Dugan, 2021) Hattie's (2012) research indicates that without being purposefully visible in classrooms focused on student learning, knowledge about teaching and impact on achievement is diminished. Katz's (2015) work with provincial superintendents reiterates that it is important to focus on effective instructional leadership behaviours. The OECD's research on *Preparing Teachers and School Leaders for the 21st Century*, addresses the different roles and responsibilities of 21st century school leaders. The lessons from around the world found that

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[1] OECD,2020
[2] Wallace Foundation exec summary
[3] Stakeholders
[4] Hattie ascribes collective efficacy as having a 1.57 effect size on achievement.

instructional leadership focused on intentionally improving student-learning matters. (Schleicher, 2015). Observational data from Learning Walks is a form of assessment for learning. Using the data observed about student learning across multiple visits to classrooms, across all grades and subjects with other forms of data such as teachers' evaluations, attitudinal data, attendance data, exams, both school-based and national to develop trends, patterns and raises questions about who is learning and who is not. Providing feedback using observational data is a form of pedagogical documentation. The feedback is meant to be used in collaborative discussions with teachers on what is working well, what are the indicators used, and where to go to next along the improvement continuum.

What Does Learning Look Like in Classrooms?

Observational data gleaned from purposefully visiting classrooms form an important data set, providing school and system leaders with useful information to determine if the intended curriculum is the taught curriculum, if the taught curriculum is in alignment with the school improvement plan and if there is sufficient effective and coherent practice occurring across classrooms. Additionally, classroom observations assist school-based leaders to provide pedagogical descriptive feedback to teachers to improve practice to impact student learning. TLW enable monitoring and learning using a different frame.

Research indicates that observational data gathered from ongoing and regular classroom visits should be woven with other data sources such as student achievement data, perceptual data and attendance data in a data tapestry of learning across the school (Bernhardt, 2004). As educators, our emphasis on purposeful and intentional presence in classrooms derives from the management literature supporting an interactive and visible style of supervision. Learning Walks are not 'the answer' but part of a leader's instructional toolkit.

Purposeful classroom observations support feedback to teachers using interactive and reflective conversations, structured to move school-based leader and teachers beyond "contrived congeniality and reinforced privilege," to collegiality and professional interdependence. (Anderson, 1998: 572). Leithwood states, "As a principal you want to pay much more attention to the specific forms of instruction that are happening in classrooms, and you want to make fewer assumptions about them all being good." (2010: 3) The need to balance ongoing demands in the office with the need for purposeful visibility in the classroom remains a daily challenge for school-based leaders. How do you find the time? Providing a teacher with useful and clear feedback that supports professional growth and honours collegiality and relational trust poses additional challenges.

The literature indicates that visible school-based leaders are regarded by staff as more credible and effective. (Blase & Blase 2006, 2012; Curtis, 2011; (Freedman, 2007; 2020); (Hammond Darling, 201); (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). Visibility in classrooms increases principal credibility as appraiser and coach/mentor because feedback is job-embedded, based on on-going, observed teacher practice. (Freedman, 2011) The stakes are high. Marshall concluded that,

"frequent, unannounced, randomly-scheduled visits can provide more accurate and reliable information on what is really taking place in classrooms than scheduled, formal observations." (1996: 344) School-based leaders reported that they were better informed and better able to coach, based on frequent classroom visits. (Freedman & Lafleur, 2003) However, the process needs to be intentional and planned. "The typical and infrequent drop-in visit by an evaluator a few times a year without continuous discussion, critiquing, and planning with others, leads to the deadening and routinization of practice." (Glickman, 2002:4); Hattie (2015) and Katz (2015), that "leaders who believe their major role is to evaluate their impact are amongst the most effective." (2015:2)

Dougherty and Sirinides (2017) in their analysis of nearly one million teachers' responses found that when teachers' roles in decision-making, professional learning and leadership are shared, student achievement and engagement increases. Teachers and administrators need preparation and guidance to initiate and sustain change dynamics. Robinson (2018) writes about the need to engage teachers as collaborative partners in the school improvement process. This requires moving from congenial to authentic, collaborative reciprocal relationships where power is shared. (Markow & Horwitz, 2006)

TIDE – A FRAME for Observation, Data Gathering and Feedback
TIDE provides a way of intentionally focusing our observational lens. Schools/districts can use whatever acronym makes it easiest to remember what to look and listen for in the context of the school and district. For TLW, the acronym TIDE represents a component of learning. We are looking to benchmark what we see and hear and to collect evidence of learning. We will collect, sort in groups, and the decide how to use the observations to construct useful feedback.

T
The *T* in **TIDE** refers to the task or what the teacher is asking the students to do. If **INSTRUCTION** is the 'how' of learning, then **TASK** is the 'what' – what are students actually doing? Is it an assignment, a list of open-ended or closed questions, problems assigned from the book, a project or a test? The focus on the **TASK** moves attention from the teaching to the actual student learning. The **TASK** is the learning. Classroom observations indicate what aspects of the intended curriculum the teacher is choosing to teach. Sometimes the outcomes/expectations are at grade level but sometimes the content is below grade level. Are the learning goals or purpose clearly delineated and visible to the learner?

I
The letter *I* in TIDE represents **Instructional Strategies**. These are the 'how' of learning or the actions and strategies teachers use to introduce, to consolidate and to assess learning. There is no one single instructional strategy that is the most effective. Marzano (2003) reminds us that for an

instructional strategy to be effective it must be used appropriately and intentionally. Hattie (2015) focused on what instructional strategies made an impact on learning. In differentiation, anticipate seeing a variety of instructional strategies in progress. The preference, of course, are strategies in use that are evidence-based. In most research studies, classroom learning is teacher directed and the teacher's voice dominates. (Hattie, 2012) For some schools, it can be helpful to ask faculty/staff to share their preferred ratio of teacher talk to student talk. Then have them reflect on the question as they are teaching for the next week or two and then come together to discuss their findings. The school leadership team can gather information about teacher/student talk from their classroom visits and then engage in an open and collegial conversation about the ideal and the reality. As educators, we need to make space for student voice to be heard, so they become active learners and not just passive consumers.

The expectation is that TLW occur regularly and intentionally. Over multiple walks, leaders can explore the degree of alignment evident between classroom instruction and the actions/strategies contained in the school's improvement plan? Which data will you collect?

D

D refers to the **Design** of the classroom as a learning environment. How has the teacher considered the classroom environment as a lever to impact and support student learning? Traditionally middle school and high school classrooms were more barren of cuing systems (anchor charts, exemplars, learning goals, rubrics/success criteria and posted student work) than elementary classrooms. This occurred partially because these secondary and upper secondary school and sometimes middle school teachers often moved room to room and didn't '*nest*' the way elementary teachers might. Also, partially because they tended to be more subject/discipline focused. Now that we understand more about how cuing systems can support student learning (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2009; Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003) we are considering classrooms as learning space in new ways. Sometimes the design is referred to as the Third Teacher. Ken Robinson (2010) was quoted in the Third Teacher, "Look at your learning space with 21st century eyes: Does it work for what we know about learning today, or just for what we know about learning in the past?" (p.1).

E

E in TIDE stands for looking through the EYE of the LEARNER. We observe for student **engagement.** Engagement is not active compliance.

- Are students just receiving information or collectively and actively engaged in the process of thinking and making meaning?
- Are students compliant in completing the task or in listening and responding to questions? Is there thinking or inquiry going on?
- Are students making connections to the task?

- If students are working interdependently, are they demonstrating building/sharing one another's knowledge and skills?
- Are they approaching the task with confidence?
- Do they find the task easy or challenging and why?
- Do they know how to improve the quality of their work?
- What is the ratio of student and teacher talk? Again, in terms of impacting the instructional core, emphasize the role of student engagement. (City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel, 2009; Safir, Dugan, 2021)

Students are the best source of data about learning. If the teacher is involved in whole class instruction, the administrator must try not to be intrusive. However, if students are working independently or interdependently, then it is desirable to circulate and scan student notebooks. If students are seated in groups, are they working cooperatively (interdependently) or independently side-by-side? If the administrators see students working on a task in groups, they can ask: who selected the members of the group? How often do groups change? How are students demonstrating their understanding and mastery of the learning? What type of task are they working on?

Refining the Focus:
Every school/system leader needs to personalize and differentiate their school walks. Sometimes the principal will just be wandering in halls and through classrooms and looking for evidence of coherency among effective practices. This is a tool, for school-based leaders to use to monitor the school improvement plan and looking for evidence of implementation and the degree the strategies required are embedded in practice. Sometimes school-based leaders, during their walks, may be gathering evidence of balanced or critical literacy, differentiation, increasing complexity in the classroom learning, problem solving, rich tasks, gender-based learning, interdependent learning and the gradual release of control or critical learning among other effective practices. This is not a rigid model but a flexible frame.

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