

THE
INSTRUCTIONAL
LEADER'S
GUIDE
TO

Informal Classroom Observations

SECOND
EDITION



SALLY J. ZEPEDA

An Eye On Education Book

The Instructional Leader's Guide to Informal Classroom Observations

Second Edition

Sally J. Zepeda

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This second edition includes an expanded set of classroom observation tools, moving from 23 to 40 and more linkages to the job-embedded nature of the informal classroom observations. There is a new chapter about how principals and teachers can extend learning opportunities by examining student work and other artifacts in postobservation conversations. These additions made sense based on feedback from the field of practice. I am indebted to the professionals who have shared insights about how they used the tools in the first edition of the book.

About the Author

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Free Downloads

Many of the tools discussed and displayed in this book are also available on the Routledge website as Adobe Acrobat files. Permission has been granted to purchasers of this book to download these tools and print them.

You can access these downloads by visiting www.routledge.com/9781596670914 and click on the Free Downloads tab.

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1

Readying for Informal Classroom Observations

In This Chapter ...

- ◆ Why informal classroom observations are important
- ◆ Principals make the commitment to get out and about
- ◆ Principals know their people
- ◆ Principals assess the context of supervision and their own beliefs
- ◆ Principals develop the leadership skills of the administrative team
- ◆ Principals develop practices to track the observation efforts of the administrative team

A resounding finding in the literature of the accountability movement is that teacher quality improves student learning. If this premise is true, then the assessment of teaching in classrooms needs to become the first step toward improving instruction and assisting teachers to examine their practices. Assisting teachers begins at the place where instruction occurs—in the classroom. Principals and other school leaders are urged to remember that, like students, teachers need opportunities to grow, develop, and learn.

What Is This Book About?

This book focuses on assisting the principal (and others) as he or she works with teachers in formative ways, primarily through informal classroom observations. To make informal classroom observations a priority, principals must frame their work habits and daily routines around dropping by classrooms and then following up by providing teachers with feedback and opportunities for reflection and inquiry. This book is written for the principal who wants to be viewed by teachers as a support for the instructional program. Assistant principals, department chairs, lead teachers, teacher leaders, and others can enhance the instructional program by developing a better understanding of informal classroom observations.

This book provides a series of classroom observation tools to help frame the informal classroom observation and follow-up discussion with teachers. This second edition includes additional classroom observation tools that have been field tested by school personnel. There is also a new chapter with tips and cues on how to incorporate examining student work and other artifacts in postobservation conversations.

Professionals are encouraged to use and adapt the tools in this book. The value of the tools and techniques offered is that they are easily adaptable. Principals, assistant principals, and coaches need not think that they have to use every tool to be an effective instructional leader. Pick the tools that make sense and use the existing tools to develop more tools.

These tools are available to you in three different ways. In each chapter you'll see how the tools can be implemented by an instructional leader during classroom observations and in postobservation conferences. In the Appendix, you will find a blank version of the same tools that appear throughout the chapters of the book. Permission is granted to those who have purchased this book to photocopy the blank forms and use them while working with teachers. Blank versions of the tools can also be downloaded from Eye On Education's Web site: www.routledge.com. See page v for details.

WHY INFORMAL CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS ARE IMPORTANT

Informal classroom observation is a way to get instructional supervision and teacher evaluation out of the main office. Teachers need feedback more than once or twice a year. Informal classroom observations provide valuable opportunities for more frequent interaction between the supervisor and the teacher. Informal classroom observations can provide opportunities to extend the talk about teaching if the principal carves out enough time after an informal classroom observation to engage teachers in a discussion of their instructional practices.

Recently, informal classroom observations have become vogue with principals who are learning the art and science of the "3-minute walk-through" advocated by the research, practice, and work of Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, and Poston (2004). The value of the 3-minute walk-through is acknowledged. This book, however, offers a different view of informal classroom observations. Namely, the informal classroom observation should be extended to more than 3 minutes to achieve its purposes—working with teachers in ways that are more meaningful. A 3-minute walk-through is simply not enough time to capture a sustained picture of teaching and learning, and that is why this book advocates a more enlarged view of the informal classroom observation. In general, teachers want context-specific information about their teaching, and data observed in the window of a 15- to 20-minute observation can provide such opportunities for specific feedback, discussion, and reflection.

Figure 1.1. Strengths of Job-Embedded Learning

Job-embedded learning ...

- ◆ does not require participants to set aside a separate time to learn;
- ◆ promotes immediate application of what is learned;
- ◆ can be formal or informal;
- ◆ links current information to previously learned information; and
- ◆ supports the generation of new ideas.

Teaching and Learning to Teach Are Complex

Part of the process of learning to teach occurs in the overall school context and in the varying contexts of classrooms where instruction unfolds in the presence of children. Learning to teach is mediated through such variables as preparation route (traditional or alternative certification), experience, professional development opportunities, and so on.

Informal Teacher Observations Support Job-Embedded Learning

Informal teacher observations and follow-up postobservation conferences are important job-embedded learning strategies because principals and teachers can purposefully learn from “their work activities” (Wood & Killian, 1998, p. 52). The strengths of job-embedded learning are detailed in Figure 1.1.

Through classroom observations, teachers and principals can link “learning and real-life problems” (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997, p. 52). As a job-embedded approach, informal classroom observations embrace what we know about attributes of job-embedded learning:

1. adds relevance for teacher learning;
2. feedback is built into the process; and
3. facilitates the transfer of new skills into practice (Zepeda, 2008).

Job-Embedded Learning Is More Relevant

First, because job-embedded learning is a part of the teacher’s daily work, it is, by its very nature, relevant to the learner. Job-embedded learning addresses goals and concerns of the individual teacher. In addition, job-embedded learning occurs at the teacher’s job site. Therefore, the teacher’s learning becomes an integral part of the culture of the classroom and by extension the school.

Feedback is Built Into the Process of Job-Embedded Learning

Second, through informal observations, feedback is built in through the structure of the postobservation conference. The data collected during the classroom observation creates fertile ground for ongoing discussions about teaching and learning. Teachers can use data to help them see their classroom practices better; if informal classroom observations occur regularly during the course of a year, data can accumulate and teachers can begin to use this data to chronicle implementation of new instructional skills, to provide artifacts for assessing transition from one learning activity to the next, or to use to frame future classroom practices.

Job-Embedded Learning Facilitates the Transfer of New Skills Into Practice

Third, job-embedded learning facilitates the transfer of new skills into practice. When ongoing support is linked with the lessons learned from classroom observations and time is afforded within the regular school day for teachers to make informed decisions based on data, transfer of skills into practice becomes part of the job.

The research on job-embedded learning reports that it

- ◆ enhances reflection;
- ◆ promotes collegiality;
- ◆ combats isolation;
- ◆ makes learning more relevant to each teacher;
- ◆ increases transfer of newly learned skills;
- ◆ supports the ongoing refinement of practice; and
- ◆ fosters a common lexicon that facilitates dialogue and improvement.

Teachers learn to teach on the job through their experiences as they plan for instruction and interact with their students. When teachers have the opportunity to talk about teaching, to share their insights with someone else, and to reflect on what occurs in the classroom, their learning increases. This type of job-embedded learning is enhanced through the efforts of the observant principal who facilitates opportunities for teachers to reflect and refine their practices through sustained feedback based on data from informal classroom observations.

PRINCIPALS MAKE THE COMMITMENT TO GET OUT AND ABOUT

The overall intent of instructional supervision is teacher growth and development. Effective supervisors do not wait to be invited into classrooms; they find opportunities for informal visits, in addition to the more formal, mandated classroom observations tied to evaluation. They constantly scan the learning environment for ways to help teachers improve on their talents.

Principals who find time to drop by classrooms seek and value opportunities to connect with their teachers, and they have a sincere desire to see teachers succeed as they face classroom challenges. Based on what principals observe in classrooms over time, they are able to:

- ◆ extend the talk about teaching and learning;
- ◆ make purposeful efforts to promote whole-school involvement by sharing what others have learned;
- ◆ involve others in conducting informal classroom observations, including members of the administrative team, department chairs, and teachers;
- ◆ get creative about sharing what has been learned through faculty newsletters, electronic mailing lists, and video clips with promising teaching practices, and
- ◆ embed learning and professional development opportunities within the reality of the school's context.

With a commitment to making informal classroom observations a part of the workday, these goals are achievable. The principal must wrap his or her thinking around the context of the school and the characteristics of the teachers in the building and then carve out time in an already busy and hectic workday. Effective leaders “know their people.”

PRINCIPALS KNOW THEIR PEOPLE

Effective leaders do their homework up front, even before conducting their first informal classroom observation. These leaders know their people, in part, because they do several things:

- ◆ assess the characteristics of teachers;
- ◆ recognize teachers' career stages;
- ◆ assess teachers' willingness to learn; and
- ◆ know, honor, and respect the adult learner.

Assessing the Characteristics of Teachers

Tool 1 will assist principals in broadly profiling any given faculty. By gathering statistical information about a school's faculty, the principal can begin to reflect about teachers' learning needs. It might be useful to have a faculty roster and a seniority list (typically available from the district office) to help track and tally information.

Tool 1: Assessing the Broad Characteristics of a Faculty

1. Number of teachers = **103** Male = **42** Female = **61**
2. For each teacher, tally the number of years in teaching.
Total number of years of experience = **900**
Average years of faculty experience = **9**
3. Number of teachers whose experience falls within the following service ranges:
 - a. 1–3 years = **23**
 - b. 4–7 years = **45**
 - c. 8–11 years = **0**
 - d. 12–15 years = **15**
 - e. 16–19 years = **0**
 - f. 20+ years = **20**
4. Number of first-year teachers = **11**
5. Number of teachers who will retire at the end of the year = **19**
6. Wildcards:
First-year teachers with experience = **0**
Alternatively certified teachers = **5**
Teachers returning to work after an extended leave = **2**
Other = **0**
7. What overall patterns do you notice?
About 20% of these teachers have three or fewer years of experience.
About half of the teachers are at the midpoint of their careers.
About 20% of the teachers are in the wind-down stage of their careers.
About 18% of the teachers are going to retire at the end of the current school year; more than likely there will be an influx of less experienced teachers hired the following year.

To extend the contextual information about the broad characteristics of teachers in the building, the principal next examines teacher career stages.

Recognizing Teachers' Career Stages

Regardless of experience, position, grade level, or subject area, learning to teach is a process that continues throughout one's career, and this is why instructional

supervision is important. As adults, teachers have learning needs that shift over time, signaling inexact stages of development. At one time, most teachers entered the profession immediately following a 4-year preparation program. Now, many teachers having had successful careers in other areas enter the profession through alternative certification routes. Suffice it to say, knowledge about teachers' career stages is important if principals are going to work more effectively to improve instructional support through the informal classroom observation process.

Figure 1.2 provides an inexact but useful way of thinking about teachers' career stages. The types of professional supports that teachers need at the beginning of their careers are very different from those needed by teachers who are further along in their careers.

Figure 1.2. Teachers' Career Stages and Developmental Needs

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Years in Field (Approximate)</i>	<i>Developmental Theory and Needs</i>
1	Preservice	0	Training and preparation for a profession
2	Induction	1–2	Survival stage: Seeks safety and desires to learn the day-to-day operations of the school and the complexities of facing new situations in the classroom
3	Competency	3–5	Confidence in work mounts, as does understanding of the multifaceted role of teaching
4	Enthusiasm	5–8	Actively seeks professional development and other opportunities; high job satisfaction
5	Career frustration	Varies	Teacher burnout
6	Stability	Varies	Complacency; innovation is low
7	Career wind down	Varies	Coasts on past laurels and status; little effort
8	Career exit	Varies	End of teaching career

Sources: Adapted from Burden (1982); Burke, Christensen, and Fessler (1984); Christensen, Burke, Fessler, and Hagstrom (1983); Feiman and Floden (1980); Huberman, 1993; Katz, 1972.

Through an educator's career span, Burden (1982, pp. 1–2) found that many changes occur in the following areas:

- ♦ job skills, knowledge, and behaviors—in areas such as teaching methods, discipline strategies, and curriculum planning;
- ♦ attitudes and outlooks—in areas such as images of teaching, professional confidence and maturity, and willingness to try new teaching methods and concerns; and
- ♦ job events—in areas such as changes in grade level, school, or district; involvement in additional professional responsibilities; and age of entry and retirement.

Given this range, it is logical for principals to use informal classroom observation as a tool to assist teachers with the uncertainties they face as a result of these changes. These changes also can affect teachers' willingness to learn.

Assessing Teachers' Willingness to Learn

People learn at their own pace. Workplace conditions, such as the relationship between administration and teachers and the norms of collegiality, also affect learning. Learning can neither be mandated nor imposed. Adults respond to learning opportunities differently. Just as effective teachers know when to shift instruction and learning activities to meet the individual and collective needs of students, principals can be more effective if they know their teachers as "learners." From this perspective, the principal is encouraged to view the school as a classroom in which all members are engaged in learning individually and collectively. The principal is able to assess current practices by examining the following:

- ♦ Learning: Do teachers seek out learning opportunities offered at the site, district, or externally, such as, graduate school, local and national conferences, and workshops?
- ♦ Sharing: Do teachers share their knowledge and expertise with other teachers? Do teachers meet to share what they have learned in professional development activities?
- ♦ Reflecting and discussing: Do teachers openly discuss what they have learned about their own teaching practices?
- ♦ Examining the talk over time: Are discussions held over sustained periods? One-time discussions do little to promote professional growth; continual discussion about progress and setbacks promotes personal and professional development.
- ♦ Reading the word: Are books, professional journals, and technology used as resources? Are these resources readily available and shared?

After examining these conditions, principals can further ready themselves for conducting informal classroom observations by understanding teachers as adult learners.

Knowing, Honoring, and Respecting the Adult Learner

Although this book is limited in its coverage of the principles of adult learning, there are several assumptions about adult learning that serve as a baseline for helping principals work more effectively with teachers.

The principal who promotes adult development strives to make learning experiences

- ◆ self-directed, with the learner at the center of all activities;
- ◆ collaborative;
- ◆ promoting of trust, reflection, and open exchanges; and
- ◆ ongoing and sustained (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1980).

Getting out of the office and entering the classroom to observe teachers is an important way to honor teachers' work and to help them to grow as adult learners. The principal who becomes a welcome guest in the classroom does so not by directing or being critical of the teacher, but by forming a partnership with the teacher. The value of the principal getting out and about lies in the opportunity to provide teachers with occasions to reflect on their classroom practices through the objective data collected in informal observations. The power that results from this feedback and the dialogue it encourages will be examined in later chapters.

PRINCIPALS ASSESS THE CONTEXT OF SUPERVISION AND THEIR OWN BELIEFS

Teachers want accessible, visible principals, but they do not want simple open-door policies or mobile principals in the halls during passing periods. Teachers want principals to visit them in their classrooms, and they desire constructive feedback. Assessment of the context of supervision includes understanding the history of supervision and evaluation, knowing the intent and purpose of supervision and evaluation, and reflecting on the interactions, past and present, between teachers and the principal. These factors shape the environment in which supervision evolves.

To create the conditions for effective informal classroom observations, the principal needs to reflect on the nature of the interactions that surround supervisory practices. The principal can assess the nature of prior classroom observations by asking,

answering, and then reflecting on the meanings that his or her responses hold for the following questions:

- ◆ Are teachers used to seeing me and other administrators in their classrooms beyond the mandated classroom observations used to evaluate?
- ◆ Do I merely report what I observe?
- ◆ Do I try to link other activities, such as professional development, to the supervisory process?
- ◆ Are postobservation conferences conducted in a timely manner?
- ◆ Where are pre- and postobservation conferences conducted? (In the teacher's classroom? The main office?)

Learning and refining existing supervisory skills are ongoing practices that continually evolve as one gains experience and nurtures working relationships with teachers.

The principal often works with other site administrators and teacher leaders who should be a part of the supervisory efforts. The principal is encouraged to spend time nurturing administrative team members.

PRINCIPALS DEVELOP THE LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

Given the size of many schools, it is almost impossible to expect the principal to stand alone, conducting all informal classroom observations. While there is no substitute for the principal's visible presence in classrooms, there is a need for the administrative team to be engaged in the work of informal classroom observations. This involvement will multiply efforts, and, by including members of the administrative team, the principal creates important conditions to do the following:

- ◆ promote dialogue;
- ◆ affirm teachers' strengths;
- ◆ assist teachers in identifying areas of instruction needing improvement;
- ◆ target areas for professional development; and
- ◆ encourage reflection.

Before this can take place, however, members of the administrative team need to be informed and prepared to take on this responsibility. A solid beginning point is to understand the beliefs, values, and assumptions that the administrative team holds regarding teaching, learning, and the efforts needed to support teachers through informal classroom observations. These understandings are important because an

administrative team that operates with similar beliefs, values, and assumptions sends a unified and powerful message to teachers.

As the leader, the principal is encouraged to set aside time for sustained discussion so that administrative team members can collectively explore their responses to the following open-ended statements:

- ◆ As a team, we plan for ...
- ◆ As a team, we monitor ...
- ◆ As a team, we model ...
- ◆ As a team, we recognize and celebrate ...
- ◆ As a team, we will are willing to confront ...
- ◆ As a team, we believe effective teachers are those who ...
- ◆ As a team, we believe an effective classroom is one in which ...
- ◆ As a team, we believe teachers grow professionally by ...
- ◆ As a team, we support teaching and learning by ...

Without such introspection, the school's administrative team will not be synchronized to work alongside the principal to meet the needs of teachers. An administrative team that works together can do the following:

- ◆ build a unified vision for supervision and professional development;
- ◆ create a healthy learning culture;
- ◆ serve as valuable resources to help teachers meet their needs;
- ◆ coordinate and provide appropriate learning opportunities based on these needs; and
- ◆ grow as professionals from their work in the school.

Making informal classroom observations an administrative priority takes concerted effort on the part of the principal and the administrative team. It takes time to make informal classroom observations a habit of mind and practice. Such a commitment is really a commitment to the overall improvement of the instructional program that focuses on the efforts of teachers but is dependent, in part, on the following tasks of the administrative team:

- ◆ *Redefining relationships with each other and with teachers.* This process begins with the principal flattening the hierarchical structures within leadership teams (e.g., principal, associate principal, assistant principal, deans, instructional deans, department chairs, lead teachers, and grade-level coordinators).
- ◆ *Sharing responsibility for learning.* All team members need to assume an active role in providing learning opportunities for themselves as they work with teachers.

- ◆ *Creating an atmosphere of interdependence.* Each member of the team needs to feel a sense of belonging, contributing to individual and collective learning opportunities while working alongside fellow administrative team members and teachers.
- ◆ *Making time for professional development.* Time is often cited as the main reason why principals and other members of the administrative team cannot function as instructional leaders. Consider the reaction teachers might receive if they indicated that they did not have time to make it to class or correct student work.
- ◆ *Developing a plan for professional development, with teacher needs guiding the process.* No plan that is not grounded in the needs of its learners will yield significant results.
- ◆ *Rotating responsibilities.* Rotation of specific duties and responsibilities associated with professional development can help to get all members of the administrative team on the same proverbial page. This rotation also can assist with breaking down barriers between people within the organization while supporting the development of skills and expertise for all team members.
- ◆ *Linking schoolwide initiatives.* The coordination of school initiatives will reduce unnecessary duplication of programs and provide resources to support initiatives.

PRINCIPALS DEVELOP PRACTICES TO TRACK THE OBSERVATION EFFORTS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

Informal observations should be tracked. Tool 2 (see page 13) provides an example of how principals can track the informal classroom observations made by administrative team members.

By reviewing the record of formal and informal classroom observations, principals can determine whether any teachers were missed, whether observations were spread evenly throughout the day (indicated by the period or time of the observation) as well as the year, what follow-up topics were discussed, and when the postobservation conferences occurred. Principals also can look for patterns. For example, in Tool 2, Marlowe did not observe Baker for 4 months, and there was a nearly 2-week delay in the follow-up; Linton balanced informal and formal observations, and Burton did not engage Schmidt in any follow-up to the informal classroom observations. The principal should interpret these patterns in the context of the school and the characteristics of the teachers being supervised.

Tool 2. Tracking Informal Observations

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Observer</i>	<i>Informal Observations</i>	<i>Date of Follow-Up</i>	<i>Formal Observations</i>	<i>Period(s)/ Time(s)</i>	<i>Follow-up Topics</i>
Adams	Schmidt	9/04/2008 11/03/2008	9/05/2008 11/04/2008	10/06/2008	1 (8:15-8:30) 5 (11:10-11:20)	Cooperative learning grouping
Baker	Marlowe	11/07/2008	11/10/2008	3/20/2008	1 (8:15-8:25) 1 (8:15-8:25)	Instructional pacing
Beatty	Linton	9/05/2008 9/08/2008 10/20/2008 11/12/2008	9/08/2008 9/08/2008 10/21/2008 11/14/2008	10/07/2008 10/14/2008 11/03/2008 11/26/2008	1 (8:30-8:45) 3 (10:10-10:25) 1 (8:15-8:25) 6 (1:05-1:15)	Classroom management; beginning- and end-of-period procedures
Burton	Schmidt	9/08/2008 11/20/2008	None None	10/31/2005	1 (8:00-8:15) 8 (2:15-2:30)	Classroom management

Looking Ahead ...

The next chapter details the intent of informal classroom observations, the premise behind informal classroom observations, and some basic guidelines to consider.

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