

'Mini-Observations' – Seven Decision Points for the Principal

By Kim Marshall

Short, unannounced classroom visits are the best way for principals to see representative slices of teaching (not the dog-and-pony show), give credible feedback to teachers, and be players in improving teaching and learning. But for principals to make effective use of mini-observations (a term I prefer to "walk-throughs," which has the connotation of *walking through* a classroom rather than *pausing* and observing thoughtfully, and is often confused with the "learning walk," a tour of an entire school with general feedback to the staff), they need to make good choices on seven key questions:

How long to stay in each classroom. When I first started doing mini-observations as a Boston principal, I found that if I stayed less than five minutes, my impressions were superficial, but if I stayed 10 or 15 minutes, I wasn't able to fit in as many visits. Five minutes yielded surprisingly rich information on each classroom, so that became my default. "What can you possibly see in five minutes?" people huff, but I've convinced hundreds of skeptics by playing a five-minute videotape of a classroom in action; almost invariably, they say that it seemed like a lot longer than five minutes and that it provided plenty to comment on afterward.

Some teachers do object to such short visits: "Hey, stick around! Watch my lesson from beginning to end." They're right—someone *should* observe a whole class occasionally and give detailed feedback on how instruction unfolds and how students respond, minute by minute. But that's a job best done by instructional coaches and peer observers, or by videotaping the lesson and watching it with a critical friend. The principal's highest priority is getting a whole-school perspective on teaching and learning, and this is incompatible with doing a significant number of full-lesson observations. Those should be reserved for unsatisfactory teachers, who need a detailed diagnosis and prescription from the boss.

How to keep up the pace. With all the other demands on principals' time, getting into classrooms is a constant struggle. A fuzzy goal—*I'm going to get into more classrooms this year*—won't work. The key is setting a numerical target for the number of visits a day and pushing relentlessly to meet it. When I was a principal, I supervised 42 teachers and settled on a target of five mini-observations a day. On full-moon days, I did zero; on quiet days, I did five; and with a lot of tenacity, I saw each teacher every two to three weeks, which added up to about 450 mini-observations a year. In a smaller school, the principal's target might be different. But the key is to have one.

What to look for. During mini-observations, the principal needs to slow down, breathe, observe the kids, look at their work, and listen carefully to the teacher. Elaborate checklists and rubrics distract the principal from being a thoughtful observer. What's needed is a *short* mental checklist of the irreducible elements of good teaching. My nominee is the acronym SOTEL: safety, objectives, teaching,

engagement, and learning. These provide good hooks for feedback to the teacher, and each can range from basic to advanced:

- Safety—physical safety -> psychological safety -> a climate that's conducive to intellectual risk-taking;
- Objectives—the lesson has a clear purpose -> it's part of an aligned curriculum unit;
- Teaching—learning is being skillfully orchestrated -> and it's artfully differentiated;
- Engagement—students are paying attention -> there is active, minds-on involvement;
- Learning—on-the-spot assessments are used to fine-tune teaching -> interim assessment data are used, too.

When principals are actively working with teacher teams to develop unit plans and look at interim assessment data, they have 3-D glasses when it comes to observing objectives and learning.

Whether to take notes during visits. Principals worry they'll forget what happens during classroom visits, so there's an urge to jot notes. But a teacher's blood pressure goes up when a principal takes out a pen or opens a laptop; many, however irrationally, believe their jobs are on the line when they see the boss write things down. In my mini-observations, I didn't write notes, but later in the day I used a one-page staff list to jot the day, date, and most salient points from each visit (later still, I added a checkmark when I gave feedback to the teacher). There are other ways to capture information; the important thing is to maintain a non-bureaucratic, low-stakes atmosphere while in the classroom.

How to deliver feedback. After a visit, the principal almost always has two or three "teaching points." But what's the best way to communicate them? Post-it notes, checklists, handwritten comments, programmed Palm Pilots or iPhones, e-mail—these all convey feedback to the teacher. But my concern is that written and electronic communication limits the amount that's said, raises the stakes, and is almost always a one-way street: The teacher rarely responds. Without dialogue, professional growth is unlikely.

Face-to-face feedback works much better. In brief conversations (mine were almost always informal, stand-up chats in classrooms, hallways, and the parking lot), it's possible to convey a lot of feedback. Teachers are more likely to be open to it, and the principal can scope out whether the teacher can handle critical comments. The teacher also can supply additional information about the lesson or unit, and can push back if the principal misunderstood something. The conversation can segue into a more general assessment of how the year is going and ideas for the future, and finally, there's no paperwork. Those are powerful advantages.

Whether to give feedback to every teacher. All teachers, including superstars, are hungry for feedback. They spend most of their working days with students and are intensely curious about what other adults think—especially the boss. As a principal, I made it my business to track down every teacher I observed (the master schedule was in my pocket to help me target their free periods) and give personal feedback within 24 hours. Sometimes I missed my self-imposed deadline, but not by much. It's a question of priorities. What's more important than conversations about teaching and learning?

Whether to use data from mini-observations in year-end teacher evaluations. The school where I was principal had tough, no-nonsense union leadership, but very quickly we agreed that I could aggregate my impressions from mini-observations into the official year-end evaluation. In other words, we dispensed with the dog-and-pony show. This happened because there was plenty of honest feedback during the year—and trust. To pull this off, an explicit union agreement is needed, including an understanding that when a teacher shows signs of being unsatisfactory, the principal needs to shift gears and embark on a more formal process.

Like any good idea, mini-observations can be mishandled. Thoughtlessly implemented, they can be unfair to teachers and even harm instruction. But if principals do mini-observations right—if they systematically visit four or five teachers a day, keep SOTEL-like criteria in mind, develop an inconspicuous way of capturing impressions, have prompt and thoughtful follow-up conversations, and negotiate a way of summing up their impressions for final evaluations—they can transform supervision and evaluation into a powerful tool for improving teaching and learning for all students.

Kim Marshall was a Boston teacher and school administrator for 32 years. He now coaches new principals and writes the [Marshall Memo](#), a weekly newsletter summarizing educational research and ideas.