

HOW INSTRUCTIONAL WALKS HELP LEADERS ADOPT A COACHING STANCE

Based on a history of principal-as-evaluator, teachers are often wary of this new role, but where principals go in with a respectful stance and a positive viewing lens—and as trust develops—teachers come to welcome their principal as coach, co-teacher, and colleague. Leaders need to first take on the role of supportive coach before taking on the role of evaluator.

—Routman (2014, p. 199)

At my former school, my regular classroom visits were well established. Teachers knew that I was there to simply recognize what was occurring in their practice from an appreciative stance.

A teacher, new to the building but with years of experience elsewhere, was surprised to see me pop in on the second day of a school year.

“Can I help you?” she asked me. “No, please go about your instruction,” I responded. “I am here to just sit in and learn.” Her quizzical look did not leave her face, but she carried on with instruction.

I later realized that I had not given the new faculty members a heads up on instructional walks and apologized for not communicating my intent. “That’s okay,” she shared. “It was nice to have someone notice what we are doing in my class and to get some feedback.” She confided that in previous school years, she did not even experience an observation from her principal, let alone regular visits.

A leader showing up in classrooms can be more than an event. We best support our teachers with a continuous presence that is both positive and constructive. Instructional walks are how we can engage in this work, in leading like a coach.

INTRODUCING INSTRUCTIONAL WALKS

I encountered this leadership approach in my first school as a head principal. Regie Routman, author of *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success* (2014), spoke at a literacy leadership institute. She defines “instructional walks” as

an intentional, informal visit (not an evaluation) by the principal to a teacher’s classroom to notice, record, and affirm strengths, build trust, offer possible suggestions, or coach—all for the purpose of increasing student literacy and learning across the curriculum. (p. 306)

While Routman references literacy specifically, instructional walks are applicable to any classroom.

Figure 2.1 is an example of documentation taken during an instructional walk in Jenny Singer’s (personal communication, September 4, 2019) fifth-grade classroom. It is a written narrative, a page-long description of the teaching and learning observed, noting and naming what is going well.

Teachers value the affirmation and the feedback about their work. They also see how these visits improve my capacity to lead. As one teacher shared via anonymous feedback, “I appreciate your regular appearances in my classroom. This gives you a good idea of what instruction looks like on a day-to-day basis.” It is low stakes and highly collegial.

Figure 2.1 Instructional walk notes: fifth-grade classroom

Jenny - Environment 9-4-19

The students were watching a Brain Pop video about independent and dependent clauses. After the video, the teacher presented a worksheet on the SmartBoard about fragments. "It's the subject, right? 'The dirty sweater' was..." After the explanation, the teacher modeled one of the problems. She then had a student come up and complete another one of the tasks, in front of his peers.

The classroom library was located on the book shelf in the back. Paint sticks were used as location markers, presumably for titles checked out by kids. Some of the books were coded by color; some were not. A variety of genres were offered, fiction and nonfiction, picture books and chapter books. The majority (at first glance) seem to be fiction/chapter book. Comfortable seating in the back corner invited students to read quietly or work together.

Jenny, the furniture you have brought in so far creates a space where students want to be.

Information gained during instructional walks can also be beneficial to our more traditional supervision systems. Current tools for teacher evaluation are not flexible enough for understanding instructional effectiveness. For example, Cohen and Goldhaber (2016) found that the rigidity of evaluation frameworks inhibits leaders' capacity to differentiate their approach when working with teachers in a wide variety of situations.

Related, Hill and Grossman (2013) learned that a leader's content knowledge can positively influence teacher improvement in specific subject areas. Leaders who lack specific content knowledge can help facilitate this process but are often ill-equipped to initially come in and communicate actionable feedback. What they need is significant

time in every classroom *to learn*—not judge—which is made possible through instructional walks.

I have observed additional benefits when engaging in this practice.

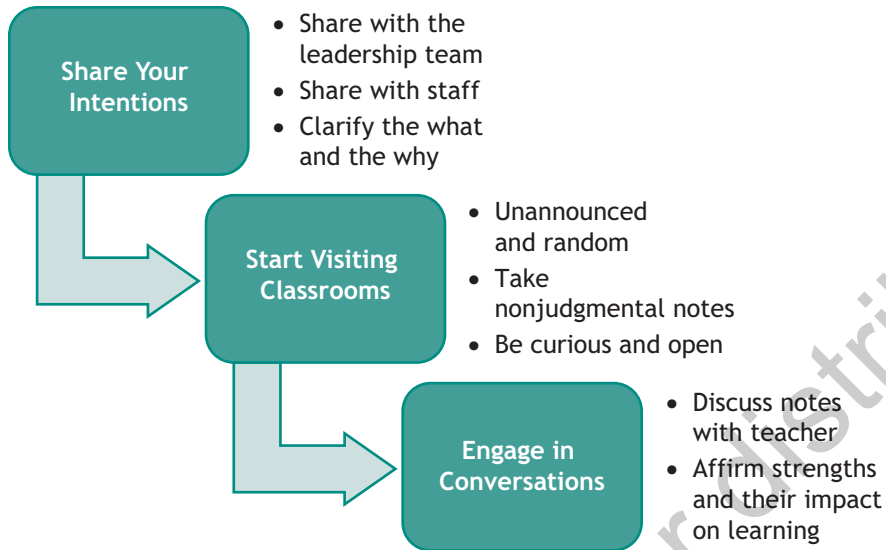
- ▶ Documenting and recognizing strong instruction with a nonevaluative, narrative format (my notes) reinforces preferred practices over time.
- ▶ Focusing first on teachers' strengths opens the door for coaching conversations.
- ▶ This process of documentation, recognition, and conversation gives teachers consistent opportunities for reflection and improvement.
- ▶ These more informal experiences “build trust and respect between the principal and teachers” (Routman, 2014, p. 200).
- ▶ Scanned and saved over time, instructional walk notes help inform opportunities to communicate more constructive feedback for teachers and the entire faculty.
- ▶ Communicating feedback becomes a reciprocal process; both teachers and leaders learn together.
- ▶ Leaders who are a positive presence in classrooms are viewed more favorably by students.
- ▶ Instructional walks are authentic and more closely resemble artifacts collected during a coaching cycle.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL WALK PROCESS

Figure 2.2 is adapted from a process created by Routman (2014).

As you will see in the following examples, the conversation at the end of or shortly after the visit is the key to professional growth. Conversations around practice help both the teacher and the leader construct meaning about what is happening in the classroom. To ensure that my interactions with faculty members are respectful, I utilize three coaching skills (sometimes referred to as “collaborative norms” in the world of Cognitive Coaching).

Figure 2.2 The instructional walk process



COACHING COLLABORATIVE NORMS

- 1. Paraphrasing:** Restating what the other person said the way you heard it
- 2. Posing Questions:** Sharing aloud what we are wondering or would like to clarify
- 3. Pausing:** Waiting silently to give time for everyone to process their thinking

My conversations with teachers, supported by these coaching skills, typically last three to five minutes. They are guided by what was just observed, documented in my notes.

On paper, instructional walks may appear easy to implement. Grab a notepad plus a pen and walk around the school. Go into classrooms, selecting a few to sit in and write down observations. Share your notes with the teacher and engage in a coaching conversation.

In reality, our days are filled with responsibilities calling for our attention. Instructional walks aren't "required," so we may tend to push them off to the next day. Maybe we don't see immediate results,

such as with a traditional walkthrough where you can tick off boxes when elements of instruction are observed.

That is why committing to daily instructional walks is key. To help make this process a regular part of my schedule, I have found a few helpful strategies.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES FOR MAKING INSTRUCTIONAL WALKS ROUTINE

- *Identify the benefits of regular classroom visits:* What are your reasons for spending time with students and teachers? For example, we can see teaching and learning in action without worrying about evaluation. Additionally, students and staff appreciate our visibility in the school.
- *Remember the “why” of this approach:* For me, it is always about supporting our journey toward schoolwide excellence, and ensuring that every student has access to a great education. We are playing the long game. The only way to know we are on the right pathway toward our long-term goals is by showing up every day.
- *Set yourself up with the right tools:* Everyone is different, but I prefer low to no technology. A padfolio with paper and a pen is all I need. Not including technology during instructional walks, when possible, helps me differentiate these visits from formal observations for teachers, in which a laptop is usually involved. In addition, I am less distracted when I do not have a screen and all its notifications in front of me.

One of the best benefits of the instructional walk process is hearing what the kids have to say. I like to sit adjacent to students, adopting a learner’s stance to “see” instruction from a student’s perspective. After conducting instructional walks regularly, students barely notice you, especially if they are deeply engaged in their learning. This is often when you can capture your best observations as the experiences are authentic.

I recall sitting in a primary classroom while students were playing math games. One group started to struggle with setting the game up, such as who goes first. The teacher came over to assess the situation. Once the students explained the problem, the teacher asked, “So what can we do to fix this?” A long pause, then one student came up with a suggestion. The teacher provided time for the group to process this idea, then asked, “What do you all think? Would this work?” The kids looked at each other and nodded. The teacher did not stop there. “Did you notice how we solved this problem? What did we do to

be successful?” The students and the teacher listed several strategies they used, such as asking questions and listening to each other’s ideas.

Once I finished transcribing this conversation, I handed over my notes to the teacher and shared the following:

You aren’t just reinforcing math skills; you are also teaching your students how to collaboratively solve problems. That is a skill they can use in any subject area and in many walks of life. You are developing thoughtful and empathetic individuals.

She thanked me for noticing. “It is hard to take more time for that type of teaching, but so worth it for building a positive learning community,” she replied.

This is the reward we receive when we show up without an agenda and instead allow instruction to guide our observations and subsequent conversations. When we take a learning stance, we see powerful instruction in places we might not expect it. With instructional walks, we surface promising practices that are often invisible during formal observations.

ACTIVITY 2.1

START WITH CELEBRATION

Teaching and leading is stressful. One gift we can give our faculty and ourselves is to recognize the positive practices and noteworthy efforts every day. In many residencies conducted in the United States and Canada, Routman (2014) has found that “celebration is at the heart of all effective teaching and learning” (p. 186). She defines celebration as when “we honestly let the learner know, whether it’s a teacher or a student, exactly what he or she has done well or attempted to do” (p. 186).

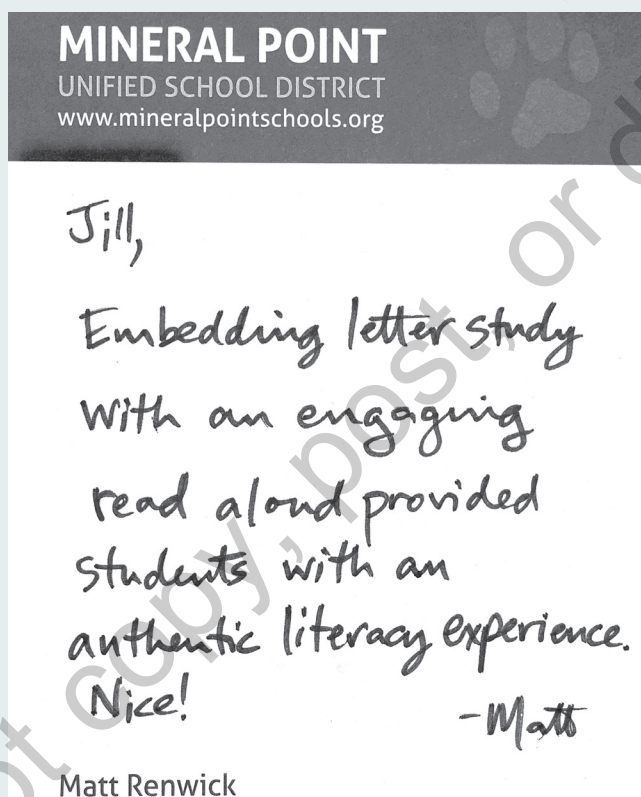
By starting with celebration, we become partners in the teaching and learning experience. This initial approach is a critical strategy for initiating conversations around our practices versus being in constant evaluation mode or delivering blanket praise. As Routman (2014) notes, “celebration must come before evaluation if teachers are to value and benefit from formal evaluations” (p. 186). Trust and relationships need to be established between the leader and the teacher for more constructive feedback to be communicated.

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One way to celebrate is using handwritten notes or annotated images of instruction. Regarding notes, I purchase personalized stationery pads with my name and contact information. As I walk through classrooms in the beginning of the year, I have one of these pads on hand. When I see high-quality practices or a genuine attempt at a new instructional strategy, I will commend their efforts with a short note in their mailbox. Figure 2.3 is one example, which I gave to kindergarten teacher Jill McGuire.

Figure 2.3 Celebrate promising practices with notes of affirmation



Consider trying this in your school. Start noting and naming what's going well in classrooms. You will find that teachers will treasure these recognitions, pinning them on their corkboards and saving to reread later. In addition, you will start to feel a similar sense of appreciation. Gratitude benefits both the recipient and the messenger.

While celebration is essential for building trust and self-confidence, it is also only the first step toward continuous improvement. Conversations among educators are what foster the greatest amount of professional growth. For instance, Hiebert and Stigler (2017) compared lesson study in Japan with the U.S. approach to professional development. They found that collaborative discussions focused on *teaching*—instead of *teachers*—led to improved theories about effective instruction, a more aligned and adaptive curriculum, and a better sense of professionalism among faculty. More promising practices dispersed throughout the school. All results were associated with improved academic outcomes.

This type of culture begins when we adopt a coaching stance via instructional walks. When we shift to a learning stance, we renew our purpose for classroom visits, from “How are we doing?” to “What are we doing, why are we doing it, and how is it making a difference?”

MAKE INSTRUCTIONAL WALKS A HABIT

If we only rely on reminders and willpower to engage in daily classroom visits, they may never become a consistent part of our practice. This is why I suggest developing a habit with instructional walks.

The science of habit formation is well documented. Bestselling books by Duhigg (2012) and Fogg (2020) have summarized the process for creating a habit:

1. *Cue or prompt*: an antecedent that triggers a response
2. *Action or routine*: the response prompted by the cue
3. *Celebration or reward*: a positive, intentional act immediately after the response

A personal example: When starting this book, I had to develop a better writing habit. Prior, I would find time after school or in between dinner and going to bed. Sometimes family experiences were missed. So my habit involved a morning writing routine. I now wake up earlier than I have in the past, commit to writing for at least 20 minutes, and then reward myself with some quiet time, a cup of coffee, and reflective journaling.

Here is my writing habit:

1. *Cue/prompt*: the alarm
2. *Action/routine*: write for 20 minutes
3. *Celebration/reward*: quiet time to think and reflect

This same process can be applied to instructional walks. Here is how I have set up this habit; you can use the same approach.

1. *Cue/prompt*: At the beginning of each week, I schedule 1.5 hours to visit classrooms. I set these appointments in my Google Calendar at specific times to ensure that I am getting a full understanding of collective instruction. The cue is the appointment reminder going off on my computer and my phone 10 minutes prior.
2. *Action/routine*: I select two or three rooms to conduct an instructional walk. I carry a checklist to ensure that I am conducting walks for all teachers.
3. *Celebration/reward*: When I hand over my notes to the teacher, accompanied by recognition, I feel good. The smile on the teacher's face and beams of pride from the students when I share my observations tell me they appreciate the acknowledgment. In addition, I also check off that teacher's name, giving me a sense of accomplishment.

How will you know if instructional walks have become a habit? One indicator is you start to feel "off" when you are not going into classrooms. It is your mind telling you that it wants to affirm and support others, and that it has associated this feeling with instructional walks.

Another indicator is other people will notice when you are not engaging in your habit. Now, during the rare time I do not wake up early before the rest of my family, my wife will ask me why I am not writing today. A similar thing occurs with instructional walks; teachers will comment that they have not seen you in a while. Students will ask when you are coming to their classroom again.

ACTIVITY 2.2

BUILD AN INSTRUCTIONAL WALK HABIT

Plan to conduct “x” number of instructional walks next week.

- Block off the time in your digital calendar and create a notification as a cue.
- Spend at least 25% of your day visiting all classrooms and select two or three of those classrooms per day to observe, document, and celebrate. This results in high-quality instructional walkthroughs in about 10 to 15 classrooms per week.
- Journal afterward. How did the walks make you feel? What went well? What would you do differently next time? Celebrate your efforts and the positive actions you noticed.

WISDOM FROM THE FIELD: ACT LIKE A RESEARCHER



It took instructional coach Sam Bennett between 30 and 40 classroom visits (about 4 years) before she was able to ask high school English teacher and author Cris Tovani a question that caused her to rethink her instruction. This question came in the form of a “coaching letter.” Cris still has this letter. Sam “acted like a researcher” in her early visits to learn as much as she could about Cris’s highly respected work (Bennett & Tovani, 2020).

Think about the experienced and highly effective teachers in your school. How many times do you estimate you will need to visit their classroom and learn before you might generate a question that may highlight an area for improvement? How might you act like a researcher? Jot down your ideas and thoughts in your journal.

FROM JUDGING TO LEARNING

When I first started as a head principal in 2012, I was skeptical of instructional walks. Quietly, I raised several questions and concerns to myself:

- ▶ *I already do teacher observations—isn't this redundant?*
- ▶ *I do not have enough time in the day for one more thing.*
- ▶ *Teachers will feel uncomfortable with me popping in their classrooms unannounced.*

So I put instructional walks on the backburner at the time. Today I am engaged daily in instructional walks, regularly visiting classrooms and experiencing instruction. What changed, and why did the change take so long?

Current supervision systems are evaluative by design. We are asked for our judgment about a teacher's performance. If the information collected from an observation is used to make decisions about one's performance and possibly their employment status, how can it also foster growth?

As previous studies shared have shown, the teacher evaluation process by itself may not facilitate professional growth. I do see merits of the system, such as accountability when addressing poor performance. Specific indicators of practice under domains such as “Instructional Delivery” and “Assessment of and for Learning” provide clarity and objectivity when principals observe teachers. It is an improvement on previous systems, such as when a supervisor would pop in and write a qualitative narrative of instruction through their subjective point of view.

However, current supervision systems are *evaluative by design*. We are asked for our judgment about a teacher's performance. If the information collected from an observation is used to make decisions about one's performance and possibly their employment status, how can it also foster growth?

With that, consider the following two examples from my school to appreciate how instructional walks can help create clarity, as well as opportunities for coaching conversations around the classroom experience. When we focus first on strengths and lead with curiosity, we can better see all the good that is happening in our schools.

EXAMPLE 2.1: BOOK CLUBS WITH MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Instructional walks offer a responsive and authentic approach to continuous professional development for all educators. This development includes principals. I have learned at least as much if not more from many of the teachers I have connected with during my regular classroom visits. Until instructional walks became a priority, my background in literacy was limited to the resources I pulled in while teaching full-time.

For example, during an instructional walk in an online middle-level classroom co-taught by Dalton Miles and Kris McCoy, I observed students discussing the books they were reading for their clubs. Within the videoconferencing tool, they would take turns sharing their thinking about what they had previously read, prompted by their teachers.

As the group transitioned to a whole-group reading strategy lesson, I thought to myself, *“The teachers devoted significant time for students to share their understanding. Would it have been more efficient to give a quick quiz?”* This thinking was partially based on this new platform (Zoom); instruction seems to require more time when online. Yet I knew my role was not to judge but to notice what was occurring through an appreciative lens. So I continued to observe as the teachers demonstrated their thinking processes for one of the books they were reading.

Later, I emailed my notes to the teachers, acknowledging the opportunity provided for students to share their understanding of what they had read so far. I also wondered why they devoted that amount of time to check for understanding.

Through our conversation, I learned that public check-ins help everyone construct meaning about the text. In addition, the teachers would use their responses as teaching opportunities. For example, a student shared their observation from *Legend* by Marie Lu that mortality rates were high in their science fiction story. Mr. Miles responded, “Things aren’t great in this dystopian American society.” This follow-up affirmed the student’s thinking *and* included genre-specific terms in the discussion for the group to hear.

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My initial belief was to maximize instructional time in the form of direct teaching and brief assessments. What I learned is that giving students the opportunity to share their thinking about their books *is* instructional time. The teachers' responsive approach to facilitating conversations around books also encouraged them to identify as readers.

With an open mind during the walk, my understanding improved. I remembered the importance of assuming a teacher believes they are doing the best they can for their students, and then recognized the authentic environment they created for readers.

Had I come into the classroom with only my preexisting thinking about reading instruction (which does not include any experience teaching these grades), our conversation may not have led to a better understanding on my end, nor the teachers affirmed in their practice. Our conversation around their decision-making was supported by my curiosity.

SPECIAL NOTE: INSTRUCTIONAL WALKS AND VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION

The previous example highlights how leading like a coach might look within virtual instruction. As of this writing, the pandemic that began in 2020 is still influencing how education is facilitated. Teaching in online spaces will continue beyond the resolution of this major global event.

During the 2020-2021 school year, I engaged in instructional walks in two ways when our school was virtual: observing live instruction via a digital conferencing tool like Zoom or watching a recorded video of instruction. Both approaches worked for affirming what teachers were doing well and communicating constructive feedback.

I did make a few adjustments to accommodate these situations:

- For live virtual instruction (also known as synchronous), instead of writing a narrative I summarized the key events from the lesson in a bulleted list. In the margins, I wrote my affirmations and questions about what I was observing. These notes were discussed after the lesson and emailed to the teachers as a scanned copy.
- For instruction that already occurred and was recorded, I followed the more traditional instructional walk process of a written observational narrative and ended with some summarizing thoughts. I had time to pause the video and reread what I wrote before posing any questions or possible next steps.

A challenge that I did not encounter was asynchronous instruction. This is when learning tasks, assessments, and student discussions are hosted in a learning management system (LMS) like Canvas and Schoology. Students can engage in learning when it works best for them. If I were to lead more like a coach in these situations, I would likely conference with the teacher as we explored the LMS together, focused on one aspect of their instruction in which they would appreciate another perspective.

EXAMPLE 2.2: SHARED READING IN FOURTH GRADE

I was sitting near the back of a fourth-grade classroom, next to the classroom library. The students and the teacher, Livia Doyle (personal communication, February 3, 2020), were engaged in a shared reading of a historical fiction novel. While the students followed along in their copy of the book as the teacher read aloud, my mind was making assumptions about whole-class novel studies.

- *They are teacher-directed and do not provide for student voice and choice.*
- *One common text does not address different reading abilities.*
- *Time spent reading together means less time reading independently.*

Fortunately, I stopped that line of thinking and simply observed. After a few minutes, Livia paused where she was reading and asked the students to turn and talk about the story so far. Then she walked over to where I was sitting and shared, “We are using this novel to teach students how to have authentic conversations about what they are reading. We are starting with turn and talk. Gradually we will build in roles and more strategies.”

I thanked her for sharing this information with me. Our school goal at the time was “A Community of Readers.” The teacher was taking a text they use within their study of history and implementing discussion strategies we were learning about during professional development. I added this context to the anecdotal notes I was writing before giving them to Livia. My notes, shown in Figure 2.4, were accompanied by my public comment about how engaged everyone seemed to be in their conversations around the text.

Figure 2.4 Document what you learned from your teachers

Livia, OLM Application 11-26-18

"Can't you just picture that in your mind?" The teacher was reading aloud *Little House/the Big Woods* as a shared reading aloud with the whole class. "We are pretty far into the chapter and it's a long one. Please get together in groups of three or four to read together and talk some more about the book. Students in one group assigned each other a passage, and then one of them began reading aloud for the group.

The teacher walked around the classroom, checking in on where a group was location-wise and they could successfully begin. "It's the same exact text, just formatted differently." The teacher gave one student her copy so he could better follow along with the group. This was the beginning of an historical fiction unit, practicing literature circle roles.

Livia, thanks for sharing how you are scaffolding the literacy activity to ensure all students are successful readers. I enjoyed watching the OLM in action.

In both the examples, it was I who initially needed the coaching. This learning occurred because the teachers knew of my intentions: not to evaluate or to judge, but to be present and to understand so that I became more knowledgeable to better support their practice. This openness to the experience is the entry point to future dialogue about their instruction.

WHAT INSTRUCTIONAL WALKS ARE NOT

Clarity is key for this work, both for leaders and for the faculty. If teachers do not understand why we are coming into classrooms and leaving notes, we may be creating confusion.

How are instructional walks different from other instructional leadership actions? Here are some of the most common approaches and how they compare/contrast with instructional walks.

MINI-OBSERVATIONS

These unannounced visits to classrooms are a shorter version of traditional observations. They are still part of a teacher evaluation system. Marshall (2013) advocates for this approach and discourages longer, announced formal observations. The advantage of the former is leaders get into classrooms more frequently and yield more evidence of instruction. Yet all observations, full or mini, are evaluative.

- ▶ *How instructional walks are different:* Instructional walks avoid judgment. Leaders are there to document the experience, to support strong instruction, and to facilitate reflection on practice. Because instructional walks are focused on strengths first and naturally lead to coaching conversations, I have found they more often support professional growth through dialogue and reflection. Teacher supervision consultants Danielson (2016) and Stronge (2019) have also acknowledged the limits of formal evaluations. It is a similar distinction between formative assessment (assessment *for* learning) and summative assessment (assessment *of* learning). Building trusting relationships between leaders and teachers is better facilitated through low-stakes experiences.

ROUNDS

This approach to observing instruction involves a group of educators walking through classrooms and documenting what is occurring, looking for patterns and trends about instruction in a school. Two types of rounds are “teacher rounds” (Del Prete, 2013) and “instructional rounds” (City et al., 2009). They are based on the medical model of rounds that teams of doctors make with patients. The goal is teachers or administrators capturing data around a problem of practice. This information is then analyzed to inform school improvement plans and adjust future professional learning.

- ▶ *How instructional walks are different:* The learning that occurs during instructional walks is between the teacher and the leader. There is a mutual benefit: the teacher gets feedback on their current practice, and the leader learns about the instruction occurring in their school. Through subsequent dialogue and

more visits, a host of benefits already discussed are realized. With rounds, the learning that occurs is primarily with the observers and less with the observed. Additionally, trust and relationships are developed during instructional walks. Having the principal be a regular presence in classrooms resets the mindset of administrator as only an evaluator; we are now able to mentor or coach.

WALKTHROUGHS

Similar to instructional rounds, walkthroughs are short visits to classrooms with the purpose of collecting information about instruction in a building. Leaders observe one aspect of instructional practice with the larger goal of understanding the general status of teaching and learning in a school. Yet walkthroughs can involve many things depending on who is asked. The classroom data collected could be quantitative or qualitative. The visits could be formative or evaluative. Feedback might come from the observer during or after instruction, or not at all. The focus for the walkthroughs could be tightly aligned with standards or loosely defined regarding quality of instruction. This lack of clarity can lead to negligible or even negative outcomes from our visits, especially if teachers are left with little, no, or inaccurate feedback. As former principal and leadership consultant DeWitt (2020) notes, “walkthroughs, when implemented without deep thought and planning, can do more harm than good” (p. 30).

- ▶ *How instructional walks are different:* While it is hard to pin down one definition for walkthroughs, instructional walks are clear. The goal is to celebrate and improve instruction schoolwide. This occurs through the process itself. Instructional walks provide a starting point for authentic conversation around practice. As Routman (2014) notes, “we are not just quietly observing and writing notes the teacher may or may not see, checking off look-fors, or collecting numerical data through a clicker. It is a process that respects both teacher and students” (p. 200). Instructional walks are centered on supporting the teacher and the students. Teachers know the purpose of this practice and how it benefits everyone involved.

To be clear, formal observations can serve as an important accountability tool, especially for documenting ineffective instruction. Rounds and walkthroughs can capture data about instruction efficiently to examine progress toward schoolwide goals. But we also need to be aware about their limitations. Teaching and learning is complex. Observations and walkthroughs tend to distill instruction down to a level or a score,

dependent on the observer with little insight from the observed. Yet can we say with 100% certainty what effect any instructional task has on a student? Cohen et al. (2020) found that formal observations cannot capture the intricacies of classroom instruction due to the general nature of evaluation rubric language. These tools are implemented with every classroom in mind, which means they can miss what makes every classroom unique and special.

To summarize, it is not the documentation of classroom instruction, but the subsequent dialogue and reflection made possible through the instructional walk process where we collectively improve the teaching and learning in our schools. Leaving these preferred outcomes to chance, such as by assuming that walkthroughs, formal observations, or instructional rounds will serve this purpose, may at best maintain the status quo.

People improve in environments more conducive to growth. Instructional walks and professional conversations enrich a community like no other supervisory practice.

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INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

For decades, professionals in education have tried to define “instructional leadership.” The purpose is to develop a clear understanding of what it is leaders do to improve teaching and learning in schools. Next are a few of the most recent definitions.

Instructional leadership is . . .

When those in a leadership position focus on implementing practices that will increase student learning.

—DeWitt (2020, p. 10)

The practice of making and implementing operational and improvement decisions.

—Baeder (2018, p. 2)

Phillip Hallinger, a pioneer in instructional leadership, offers a framework for this concept using three categories:

1. Create the school mission.
2. Manage the instructional program.
3. Develop a positive school learning climate.

—Hallinger et al. (2018)

Yet what does this look like in action? Where do we start? How do we know if we are successful? This is the purpose for the rest of this book: to share specific strategies for engaging in leadership actions that will lead to instructional improvement.

We do this by following the C.O.A.C.H. framework, a pathway toward schoolwide success, and by engaging in instructional walks every day. See the bulleted list for how the tenets of instructional leadership are embedded in this approach and this practice:

- ▶ *By creating confidence through trust*, such as through developing the collaborative norms for how we talk and listen with each other, *we develop a positive school learning climate* for everyone.
- ▶ *By organizing around a priority*, for example, identifying a high-leverage instructional strategy to learn about and apply to our collective practice, we create alignment between *the district's mission and vision* and classroom instruction.
- ▶ *By affirming promising practices* to validate and encourage what is already working in our school, and by *communicating feedback* with teachers to support continuous improvement, we *manage the instructional program* by implementing what we believe is most effective for student learning.
- ▶ By consistently engaging in the first four practices, we are *helping teachers become leaders and learners*. We co-create a collective belief that a community of professionals can make a real and positive impact on the lives of their students. The true role of a school leader is then realized: uncovering the potential of a school that was there from the beginning.



Reflective Questions

Consider the following questions to promote reflection. You can respond to them in writing and/or in conversation with colleagues.

1. What are three key takeaways for you after reading this chapter?
2. Think about each of your faculty members. Which two teachers do you think would be most open to having you conduct initial instructional walks in their classrooms? Why?
3. What one habit could you drop and replace with instructional walks? For example, do you need to check email as frequently as you currently do? How much time might you recapture for classroom visits if digital messaging was scheduled for only a couple of times a day?