Peer observation: a supplement to formal evaluation

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The purpose of this study was to describe the benefits of peer observation as it affected the teaching staff of Woodbury Junior/Senior High School (New Jersey).

A survey was administered to a group of 13 teachers in the Woodbury Public Schools after they had experienced peer observation. The original sample included 28 teachers who had been selected by the intern in an attempt to guarantee diversity in age, experience, gender, and teaching discipline. Participation was voluntary and those who volunteered were permitted to select their partner and choose their role in the process. Twenty-four teachers wished to participate but almost half were disqualified because their schedule conflicted with their partner’s schedule. All participants were free to decide whether they would observe or be observed. Once an observation was completed, each member of the pair filled out a brief questionnaire. The observer offered a reason for visiting that particular class. Both participants answered ten questions that were graded on a Likert scale. A mean score was used to interpret the data.

The data indicate that the respondents recognize, respect, and appreciate the skills and problem solving abilities of their teaching colleagues. The respondents would appreciate more opportunities where teachers can review their work with students and receive peer reinforcement and advice.
Mini-Abstract

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Teachers tend to view with impatience or skepticism supervisors who proffer opinions on classroom management unless those supervisors “have been there.” A teacher who considers himself/herself to be a professional educator embraces any opportunity to improve his/her performance in the classroom. Yet, while researching a paper that I wrote three years ago, I discovered that fifty percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first six years of service with lack of support offered as the most prevalent reason. A veteran teacher is quick to appreciate the support offered by a formative approach to supervision. Most veterans, on the other hand, have come to dread and reject as useless the token, annual, frequently unannounced appearance of the supervisor who practices the summative approach.

Teachers respect and admire other teachers whom they deem to be effective and successful communicators. It is not unusual to discover that the average teacher “knows” who the best teachers in his/her building are even though the average teacher has probably not had the opportunity to witness the effective teacher at work in a classroom. Opportunities must be created for teachers to review their work with students and receive peer reinforcement and advice. Since prevailing conditions inhibit administrators’ attempts to improve instruction, it is necessary to design an alternative plan. One approach is an internal, collegial support system. Professional literature has devoted increased attention to this effort from as far back as 1977.
One of the greatest reservoirs for improvement of instruction exists in the competence of excellent teachers in every school building in this nation (Hopfengardner, 1984, p.37). In initiating a collegial support system, the instructional leader is encouraged to redesign the model presently in use from a directive posture to a supportive posture.

Although a quality plan would require commitments of time for supervision and training as well as funds for staff development, collegial supervision can contribute to an improved climate between the instructional leader and teachers.

One of the great tragedies in education has long been that innumerable persons have received their college degree and teacher certification, been hired to teach, been assigned to a classroom, begun their teaching career, and, years later, have left the classroom never having formally (or even informally) observed another teacher (Campbell, 1990, p.3).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe the benefits of peer observation as it affects the teaching staff of the Woodbury Junior/Senior High School using a community based action research design. The study will result in a feasibility report to inform teachers and administrators.

In 1984 Jerrold Hopfengardner characterized the current “state of the art” in instructional improvement as unorganized and unfocused observation programs, teachers anxious about administrators’ observations, and supervisors having unrealistically positive ideas about their effects on instructional improvement. He added that this situation is aggravated by the inability of many principals to act as true instructional leaders because of administrative demands. Even the most conscientious principal is hard pressed to find the time to help teachers who need intensive day-to-day supervision. Unfortunately, that circumstance is not likely to improve.
A recent article in a Philadelphia newspaper was critical of the city school district and the administrative failures at one particular high school.

Fresh out of college with a teaching degree last summer, Heidi Temple heard the pitch from (Philadelphia) School District officials. She could be part of a bold new program to reform teaching in city high schools, and rescue students from dropping out. An enthusiastic Temple signed up, thinking she could make a difference. She didn't. Temple and other teachers said school officials ignored their requests to discipline disruptive students and to help get students to attend school. Now, she's moving to rural Virginia to teach (Haney, 1998, p.7).

The classroom teacher needs more help than is available under present circumstances. At the moment there are four administrators available to perform formal evaluations and two of them (administrators) are charged with the duty of enforcing discipline in the junior/senior high school, which causes unexpected interruptions in their daily schedule. Pre-conferences are never held before the actual visit to the classroom.

Therefore, there is one visit per tenured teacher as required by law and a post-conference. The visit may occur as late as April and the post-conference may occur a week later. The implementation of peer observation would allow a teacher to invite a colleague to observe the teacher's class at any time during the school year. The colleague, presumably a friend or a member of the same department, could offer insights on classroom management or recommendations to improve the lesson that was presented. The teacher could visit the colleague's class or observe another teacher's class. This approach promotes collegiality as well as the sharing of classroom strategies.

**Definitions**

Feasibility (report) – Capable of being accomplished or carried out.

Direct assistance (formative observation) – The provision of personal, ongoing contact with an individual teacher to observe and assist in classroom instruction.
Action research – The systematic study by a faculty of what is happening in the classroom and school with the aim of improving learning.

Formal evaluation (summative evaluation) – A procedure performed to determine whether or not a teacher measures up to a predetermined standard of acceptable work.

Supervisor – Anyone with direct responsibility for improving classroom and school instruction.

Peer coaching – The use of teachers helping other teachers through clinical supervision.

Clinical supervision – The structure, normally a series of sequential steps, for conducting observations with teachers.

Directive supervision – An approach based on the belief that teaching consists of technical skills with known standards and competencies for all teachers to be effective. The supervisor’s role is to inform, direct, model, and assess those competencies.

Collaborative supervision – An approach based on the belief that teaching is primarily problem solving. The supervisor’s role is to guide the problem solving process, be an active member of the interaction, and keep the teacher(s) focused on their common problems.

Non-directive supervision – An approach based on the premise that learning is primarily a private experience in which individuals must come up with their own solutions to improving the classroom experience for students. The supervisor’s role is to listen, be nonjudgmental, and provide self-awareness and clarification experiences for teachers.

Limitations of the study

The Woodbury Public Schools are represented by three elementary schools a 6th grade annex, and a junior/senior high school, which includes grades 7-12. Because of the uniqueness of the elementary schedule and the fact that the elementary teachers are responsible for all subject areas, it may be more difficult to extend the peer observation opportunity to those levels without the hiring of an outside substitute for the day. There may be a possibility that the building principal would be able to substitute while the
classroom teacher/peer observer is administering a test on an individual lesson. This would enable the teacher to observe a lesson in another room.

The intern is optimistic that there would be interest for peer observation at the junior/senior high school level where class periods are 42 minutes long and teachers are members of departments. The key to reducing or eliminating prohibitive cost factors would be the willingness of the department chairpersons to relinquish their third preparation period during the second and third marking periods. Without the help of the department chairpersons, it would be necessary to hire a substitute to arrange coverage.

The intern is aware that there are circumstances that might prevent the proposal from being implemented. The foremost circumstance is the possible elimination of teaching positions due to the defeat of the budget last spring. If department chairpersons lost their extra preparation period (for department business), they would justifiably be reluctant to serve as substitutes in order to facilitate the movement of teachers. Teachers might not volunteer to participate in this study for various reasons. The colleague (chosen observer) might find it too difficult to arrive at the teacher’s class before the beginning of the period. Some teachers might have a schedule conflict with the colleague whom they would select as an observer. Some might consider the process to be a distraction to their students. Others might fear that administrators could ask the colleague for an opinion on the teacher’s performance thereby allowing an “observation” to be a factor in the teacher’s formal evaluation.

Setting of the study

The city of Woodbury is located in southwestern New Jersey near the Delaware River, ten miles from Philadelphia. Woodbury is a historic community that was settled
originally by Quakers in the early 18th century. Today, the city serves as the seat of Gloucester County. The county’s administrative offices and Criminal Justice Center are located here, as is Underwood Hospital. This would explain the presence of medical, legal, and communications professionals as well as support staffs who choose to reside in this tiny community of 2.5 square miles. Consequently, the city’s population is quite diversified.

The Woodbury School District operates three elementary schools and Woodbury Jr.-Sr. High School, serving a total of 1,673 students. According to the annual Report Card on the Schools that is published each September by the Philadelphia Inquirer, the 1997-98 student population was 59% White, 37% African-American, 1% Asian, and 3% Hispanic. On a socioeconomic status indicator that rated school districts from A (lowest) to J (highest), Woodbury’s rating was B. Using the 1996 11th grade High School Proficiency Test as an indicator the Report concluded that Woodbury’s performance placed the district in the top middle 25% of all schools in the state and in the top 25% of schools that have a similar income. During the 1997-98 school year the school district averaged spending $8,506 per student which ranked it in the top middle 25% of districts in Gloucester County. Also, in the 1997-98 school year 83% of eligible students took the SAT’s and achieved an average total score of 921. As to whether high school students in the district had expectations of attending college, the Report announced that 28% of Woodbury students planned to attend a 2-year college while 59% planned to attend a 4-year college.

Significance
Other researchers have affirmed Hopfengardner's aforementioned argument that supervisors have unrealistically positive ideas about their effects on instructional improvement. In a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Bettye Vickers (1989) contended that principals perceived their supervision methods as more collaborative and directive, whereas teachers perceived the supervision as less collaborative and directive, and more non-directive. R. Stevan Jonas (1986), Director of Special Instructional Services and Pupil Personnel for the Fulton Public Schools in Fulton, NY, presented his theory of "access" (to teachers by supervisors) before the Convention of the American Educational Research Association. He proposed that supervisors tend to see things quite oppositely from teachers. That is, they conceive their efforts to be quite beneficial to teachers. An underlying premise is the assumption that the one to whom help is offered will accept and use it. Jonas likened the situation to a student yielding control of the classroom to the teacher while retaining control over what and how much he/she learns. Jonas also argued that the efficacy of the system of supervision in the schools is open to question. He affirmed the point that teachers view supervisors as having left the scene of the "action" and no longer having the expertise they may have had at one time. Nevertheless, teachers perceive supervisors projecting the image of teaching expertise, which they (teachers) see them as lacking.

The following quote is from an administrator who left the classroom 15 years earlier but who returned to serve as an elementary teacher's aide.

Most teachers are clinicians at heart. They work in crowded settings, but they strive to reach individuals, and the meaning teachers derive from their work is tied to the quality of relations with individual students. Teachers do not teach a class; they teach 30 individual students.

Administrators, on the other hand, tend to find meaning in collective experiences—implementation of a new program, increased test scores for the 8th
grade, or a reduced drop out rate. It is not that administrators are wrong and teachers are right. It is just that they differ when it comes to what is regarded as meaningful. Failure to appreciate these differences can lead to unproductive relations between teachers and administrators (Duke, 1986, p.31).

It was the belief of the administrator quoted above that administrators must take great care to avoid doing things that diminish the meaningfulness of the school experience—for teachers as well as students. To enhance meaningfulness, administrators should spend more time talking to teachers about individual students—their progress and problems. Also, administrators should protect teachers from remaining overextended for too long, be prepared to intervene on their behalf, and create opportunities for teachers to talk with each other constructively.

**Organization of the study**

Chapter 2 will sustain and substantiate the rationale for peer observation through the use of anecdotes and the emphasis of supportive literature. Chapter 3 will address the areas related to the research design of the study by discussing specific content such as sampling technique, the survey instrument itself, and the data analysis plan. Chapter 4 will offer additional evidence of the study’s impact through the presentation of the research findings. Chapter 5 will summarize the conclusions and implications of the study by examining the intern’s consequent development as a leader and any subsequent changes, which may have occurred within the organization.
Chapter 2

Prologue

The intern has been teaching mathematics for thirty-two years and most of that
time has been spent at the high school level. He has accumulated many indelible
experiences and formed many firm opinions during his teaching career. The
characteristics that he most admires in people are a kind heart, an unselfish nature, and a
willingness to help others. He has high expectations of leaders who serve the public in
any arena and he is particularly steadfast in his belief that a true leader not only inspires
others but also cares about others as well.

Leadership means getting people to think, believe, see and do what they might not
have without you. It means possessing the vision to set the right goal and the
decisiveness to pursue it single-mindedly. It means being aware of the fears and
anxieties felt by those you lead even as you urge them to overcome those fears. It
can appear in a speech before thousands of people or in a dialogue with one other
person – or by example. And, above all, they (great leaders) have brought out the
best in the people they led (Bradley, 1998, p.6).

There is a desperate need for this type of leadership in today’s public schools.
Personally, the intern finds it difficult to accept that one can possess the vision and
awareness cited above without having spent a significant amount of time in the shoes of
those whom you wished to lead. It disturbed the intern when he read that the
superintendent of schools in Philadelphia, an outspoken critic of his teachers and their
union, has no teaching experience. Similarly, it made no sense to the intern when he
learned that the present commissioner of education in the state of New Jersey himself has
never taught in any public elementary or secondary school. The intern wonders how one
can profess to understand and appreciate a task if one has never performed that task? The
intern believes that credibility and respect must be earned. They can not be acquired or bestowed.

In June of 1968 the intern had just finished his first year as a teacher during which he was paid an annual salary of only $4800. Consequently, it was necessary for him to find employment for the summer. He spent the first of two consecutive summers working at Standard Pressed Steel in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania. He was surprised to learn that the plant was not a union shop. The explanation made perfect sense to the intern, who was then twenty-two years old, and has served as a lesson to him ever since. The company’s owner was a man named Thomas Hallowell, who was then in his fifties. As a boy, when young Thomas was old enough to work, his father required him to learn every job in the building by working shoulder to shoulder with the other employees. His father told him that he (Thomas), the future owner, would never earn the respect of the employees or understand their concerns if he did not share their experiences first. As a result of the father’s wisdom, the men with whom the intern worked at that time explained that there would never be a need for a union as long as Mr. Hallowell was the owner. Many years later, when the Strawbridge family sold the Strawbridge & Clothier chain, the intern read of a similar situation involving the patriarch of their clan. He (the elder Strawbridge) had established a policy whereby younger members of the family, future heirs to the business, were sent to work as employees in various retail stores in New York where the family name carried no importance.

Since beginning his odyssey toward a degree in educational leadership, the intern routinely reads advertisements for administrative openings in local school districts. Also, he reads the educational backgrounds of administrators who are newly hired. Most
advertisements invite a response from “experienced” professionals but often that experience requires only three to five years of service as a classroom teacher. The intern wonders why our educational system is intent upon creating a hierarchy of career administrators who possess a minimum of experience in a classroom? In fact, it is not uncommon to find administrators and supervisors who possess less than ten years of experience as a full-time teacher. The intern believes that development explains why so many administrators and supervisors in public school districts have distanced themselves from the opinions, concerns, and needs of their teaching faculty.

There seems to be a disturbing discrepancy between administrators’ and teachers’ views about the supervisory services being provided for teachers. In a survey of teachers and administrators conducted by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, supervisors and administrators consistently rated the quality of their instructional supervision higher than teachers did (Weber, 1987, p.2).

Certainly, the intern was a better teacher during his second ten years in the classroom than he was during his first ten years. It is the intern’s belief that experience deepens understanding. Two years ago, a student in an honors algebra class listened intently as the intern deciphered a classmate’s question and clarified it for the other students before he (the intern) explained the solution. The first student raised his hand and marveled, “How can you understand what we mean when we don’t even understand what we mean?” The intern laughed and said, “Experience.”

The intern is equally certain that he has been a more valuable resource to new or younger teachers during the second half of his teaching career than he was during the first half. The intern has had many inexperienced teachers thank him for resolving their problems after they had received advice from a supervisor that was less than helpful. For example, teacher “John” was assigned to teach a mini-course in computer keyboarding to
6th grade students in September less than a week before the students’ first day. The students would be his for twenty-three days and then they would rotate to a new course. At that time a new group would rotate to him. The lab contains eighteen computers and, therefore, can not accommodate more than eighteen students. Supervisor A informed “John” that the second group would contain twenty students. When “John” asked A what he (“John”) was supposed to do with the two extra students, A responded, “I guess you’ll have to find two more computers.” When “John” asked the intern where the extra computers were located, he (the intern) explained that there weren’t any extra computers. The intern asked “John” to explain his situation to supervisor B. B topped A by suggesting that “John” make photocopies of a keyboard and have the extra students practice their keyboarding on the photocopies. When “John” returned with B’s recommendation, the intern could not help but laugh.

Evaluators should have something valuable to offer and be willing to understand the teacher’s obstacles, as well (Weber, p.29).

There is no substitute for experience when a teacher approaches a supervisor in need of an alternative strategy or a solution to a problem. The intern, an experienced peer who could imagine himself in “John”’s shoes, recommended a solution which has worked so far.

**Isolation and Mistrust**

It is the intern’s humble opinion that teachers in today’s classrooms are receiving less respect, appreciation, and support than ever before. It comes as no surprise when adolescents challenge, argue, and make expedient choices. It is their nature. Parents, on the other hand, are usually more reasonable and open-minded until their child becomes the focus of criticism. Most parents advocate strict rules and rigid academic standards
but, when it is revealed that *their* child is failing to measure up in one way or another, those same parents would prefer that those strict rules and rigid standards be applied to *other people’s* children. That is the protective nature of parents.

The intern’s strongest criticism is reserved for those who should know better. He is most discouraged by the minimal concern and support that teachers are receiving from their own administrators and supervisors. The intern is not sure if it makes him feel better or worse to find so much research affirming the sense of loneliness that teachers are experiencing in their own work environments.

Most teachers operate in a “feedback vacuum” which hinders their professional growth. Because of lack of time, school schedules, mistrust, and other factors, teachers often spend little time, with the possible exception of the lunch break in the lounge, interacting with other teachers, sharing ideas and practices, and giving and receiving help (Mello, 1984, p.6).

Most teachers work in isolation. The classroom cells in which teachers spend much of their time appear symbolic of their relative isolation from one another and from sources of ideas beyond their own background experience (Scott, 1987, p.3).

One of the major problems that face teachers is the loneliness of teaching. The fact that teachers have little contact with peers during the workday or the workweek creates a problem for morale and a problem for growth (Minor, 1991, p.3).

The workplace is typically designed so that no one else in the school knows what they are doing or how well they are doing it. Teachers for too long have been isolated from those surrounding them (Hill, 1995, p.16).

Without supportive supervision, teachers feel that their work is unimportant and occurs in a very isolated situation (Carroll, 1997, p.16).

Unlike an individual’s private loneliness, the loneliness cited above is an imposed loneliness. The intern’s current teaching schedule serves as an example. For the last seven periods of his day, a span of six hours, the intern has no opportunity to have a conversation with any other teacher in his building. He teaches five periods, supervises
students who are serving in-house suspensions for one period, and patrols the hallways
during the final period of the day in a building that has three levels. In between the intern
has twenty minutes to eat lunch alone and prepare audio-visual equipment for use. He
can understand the passion of those who argue that an isolated work schedule can have a
deleterious effect on a teacher’s morale. A teacher wants to continue to believe that he or
she is valued as a partner in the school district’s educational mission but one can easily
begin to feel more like an employee, indistinguishable from secretaries and maintenance
staff.

One principal has been quoted as saying that he prefers to keep teachers away
from each other because, when teachers get together, they just complain. Four years ago,
in one of the intern’s graduate courses, a current superintendent who was an invited
speaker told the class that he viewed teachers the same as birds on a wire. He said, “If
you shoot one off every once in a while, the others will fly higher and faster.” The intern
has never forgotten that callous remark. Attitudes such as these erode a teacher’s
willingness to trust his “superiors”.

Traditional mistrust between teachers and administrators... makes the task of
improvement and increased teacher effectiveness a most difficult goal to
accomplish (Mello, p.4).

Yet, missing from the comments was a mention of the principal or assistant
principal as an instructional leader. Most teachers sought out their peers to
discuss problems. Teacher #1 discussed a time during which she was having
difficulties in the classroom and in her personal life. She stated that while the
administrators were coming down on her, they offered no support. Several
teachers expressed mistrust of administrators. One specifically noted that her
professional growth was not attributable to any administrator (Singh, 1996,
p.153).

Accordingly, some teachers in evaluation conferences with supervisors may try to
conceal difficulties they are having or other information they think might be used
against them (McColskey, 1997, p.4).
There must be an interpersonal climate in the building that conveys the sense that people care about each other and are willing to help each other (Murphy, 1987, p.22).

**Improving the Climate**

Trust is encouraged or discouraged by the spoken word. A successful administrator must be an astute communicator. Oratorical skills are not required. An expansive vocabulary is a luxury. The avoidance of educational jargon such as “systemic” and “rubric” would be a welcome change. However, the intern is more concerned with the essence of communication. To be perceived as trustworthy an administrator must be honest and sincere. Words must be weighed and woven carefully. Consistency is expected. Ambiguity is unfair to the listener who is in need of a precise message. One principal addressed his faculty and said, “Remember, there is only one reason we’re here and that’s the kids.” A different principal addressed a group of visiting teachers and said, “There are four groups that matter in my school; students, parents, teachers, and administrators.” “And, of those, the most important are the teachers and the students.” The intern heard both messages but only the second principal conveyed the impression (to the intern) that he cared as much about the well being of his teachers as he cared about the well being of his students. The first principal may value his teachers as much as his students but his message left the impression that he does not. An effective communicator does not require the listener to “read between the lines.” In the memorable words of one anonymous comic, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can cause permanent injury.”

Personal qualities of the evaluator certainly enter into the picture -- their trust level, their patience, and their persuasiveness. But the impressions evaluators make result largely from their professional traits: their credibility...their knowledge of each teacher’s goals and unique difficulties; their track record as a
supervisor and advice-giver; and their ability to model new ideas or techniques for teachers (Weber, p.32).

**Assessment**

Teachers are acutely aware of the spotlight that has been cast upon their profession by a suspicious public and an inquisitive media. Education is a national issue driven by political parties and late-night pundits. Even in school districts where test scores are high, school boards have replaced superintendents because the superintendents were popular with teachers. That rationale would seem to be the inspiration for the "birds on a wire" mentality cited earlier. The taxpayers are demanding accountability. However, what many critics conveniently seem to forget is the fact that teachers are parents and taxpayers also.

Many policy makers – claiming they represent the public’s will – have decided that the most direct way to improve student achievement is to emphasize teachers’ accountability, using tests and other means to weed out the ineffective and incompetent teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, prefer evaluation systems that are meant to improve teaching. They want evaluations that preserve the autonomy and rights of teachers and that take into account the complexity of the teaching art (Weber, p.5).

What is clear is the need for teacher evaluation and the need to evaluate teachers fairly and completely (Lengeling, 1996, p.1).

The most significant way that a school district communicates its regard for its teachers is the administration’s method of assessing teacher performance.

**Formative v. Summative**

In May of 1997, as the school year was winding down, the intern’s school district advertised for volunteers to serve on an “evaluation committee” which would review the district’s current evaluation process. The intern volunteered to serve because of his interest in this issue. The committee’s first meeting took place the following September. There were approximately 10-12 teachers present representing the high school, junior
high, and elementary schools. The superintendent had selected the two junior and senior high school assistant principals who also serve as evaluators as co-chairpersons. They informed those present that the committee’s assigned task was to create a new or revised evaluation instrument. The teachers expressed their desire to expand the task to include the possibility of clinical supervision. The chairpersons argued that a new instrument would address our (teachers) wish. They (chairpersons) were using the words “evaluation” and “observation” interchangeably.

Often administrators see the responsibilities of supervision and evaluation as one in the same – but in truth, they are not (Carroll, 1997, p.3).

The teachers insisted that we were talking about two distinctly different concepts – a formal evaluation process (summative) as opposed to an informal observation process (formative). It was a classic case of two groups who were pursuing decidedly different agendas.

The attempt to separate the concept of objective measurement from subjective evaluation has been an ongoing struggle and subject of much debate within the field of educational testing (Lengeling, p.1).

Traditional teacher performance appraisal programs result in virtually no consequences for either high or low quality performance. The standard approach is time-consuming for administrators, and the process remains threatening to teachers, even though the results are widely ignored. All too often, the richness of context is undermined by attempts to fit observations into a predetermined list of criteria. The assumption is that everything must be seen and evaluated during every visit. In addition, traditional performance appraisal systems have decidedly negative connotations for teachers (Allen, 1997, p.30-31).

Teachers voiced complaints that one could be babbling nonsense while using the correct procedure and earn high marks on the instrument. On the other hand, a teacher could be probing a concept in a manner not prescribed by the instrument and be marked down. Teaching has a subjective dimension, which gives it creativity that cannot be measured by an objective instrument (Carroll, p.16).

Supervision involves less rating and more giving advice. In evaluation by contrast, a teacher’s performance is being rated. This process involves making decisions about the adequacy of a teacher’s job performance. Teacher evaluation
is usually the summative result of a one-shot visit where the administrator/evaluator makes one visit during the school year to rate the teacher’s performance. Many times, evaluation is based on a few sporadic, unannounced visits to the classroom with no prior discussion with the teacher on what will be taught or any problems that teacher might be experiencing and need help solving. Evaluation systems based on accountability produce negative feelings, lack of participation, and less likelihood of altered classroom behavior (Carroll, p.4).

Peer Observation

A peer is a colleague who has no formally recognized authority over the person being evaluated but shares the common experience of teaching and, thus, is a valuable source of information on quality teaching (McColskey, p.2).

It will come as a revelation to many people but good teachers are dedicated to becoming better teachers. The average person never sees teachers spending hours after school preparing for the next day. The average taxpayer never witnesses teachers spending their own money to purchase materials or classroom decorations. The average parent never sees teachers lending money to students or giving a calculator to a student with no expectation of ever being repaid. Other teachers witness these acts, which is why other teachers respect good teachers.

Implementing a system that allows for peer review and feedback builds on the knowledge and skills of other teachers in the school. This knowledge may be the most valuable and perhaps the most underutilized resource that any school has available to help teachers improve (McColskey, p.2).

The most significant questions are whether teachers would be receptive to the possibility of allowing colleagues to observe them while they teach or whether they would be interested in an opportunity to observe a colleague teach.

Fenner and Rothberb (1991) surveyed two hundred and thirty teachers from many different schools in eight central Florida counties. Their study was conducted to determine teachers’ perceptions of teacher assessment. They found an overwhelming positive response concerning peer observation and peer professional coaching. Eighty percent of the respondents said observation of other teachers would be helpful to their professional growth. Seventy-seven percent of teachers said they would welcome being observed by other teachers,
and most surprising, sixty percent said they would consider outside, objective observation and feedback (Atkins, 1996, p.4).

The key element to effective supervision is not who the supervisor may be, but rather what level of collegiality exists between the parties involved. Colleagueship must exist in order for clinical supervision to be successful. It allows the human resource factor of a school to join together in an effort to improve instructional practices. Peer coaching has been implemented in many schools as a form of clinical supervision (Carroll, p.12).

When discussing clinical supervision, one would envision a relationship between a supervisor and a teacher which is built on mutual trust (Carroll, p.6).

Peer feedback systems require a great deal of trust, which may take time to develop if the peer is not already known (McColskey, p.8).

Nearly all of the participants did not feel that administrative observations promote quality teaching. In fact, more than half of the tenured teachers believe peer observers can relate better to new teachers, and offer more practical advice than administrators (Martocci, 1997, p.13).

Conclusions

There is no disputing that summative evaluations are necessary and will forever be part of a teacher’s contractual requirements. There is no denying any employer’s right to evaluate an employee’s performance according to a uniform set of standards. However, there is a substantial amount of evidence that screams that evaluation instruments do not improve a teacher’s performance if that is the desired effect!

We can’t pride ourselves on individualizing instruction for students and then treat all adults exactly alike. We can’t press teachers to develop alternative sources of assessment to get richer pictures of kids’ performance and then evaluate teachers the same way we did in 1950 (Brandt, 1996, p.33).

This is not about reinventing the wheel. This is about a teacher discerning what his or her needs are and knowing who is most capable of providing the necessary help. Administrators should not be bitter to learn teachers do not trust them as well as they (teachers) trust their colleagues.
100% of the principals agreed that evaluations made by administrators promote quality teaching. Only 38% of the non-tenured teachers and 12% of the tenured teachers agreed (Matrocci, p.17).

As part of his research the intern read an article about a study of fourteen teachers who were able to effect sufficient change in their teaching behaviors to improve their performance ratings from incompetent to competent and, in some cases, from marginal to excellent. Most of those teachers sought out their peers to discuss problems. The responses about peers were “specific and more positive than for any other source of professional support.” One of those teachers, in an interview, went so far as to credit his peers with saving his career.

I probably would have walked out the door if it had not been for my colleagues and the support they gave me (Singh, p.154).
Overview

The hypothesis tested was whether peer observation could become an effective process to improve teaching and learning. The purpose of this chapter is to present the design of the study by describing its four distinct stages. The first stage portrays the development and design of two research instruments, surveys that were employed in the study. The second stage explains the selection of the sample and the sampling technique that was used. The third stage describes the procedures and strategies that were used to gather the data. And, finally, the fourth stage offers a data analysis plan, which serves to explain the manner in which the collected information was utilized.

The Instruments

The intern determined that there would be a need for two separate instruments. The first was necessary in order to recruit participants for the study. It consisted of a brief letter (see Appendix) which explained the premise of the thesis and invited a predetermined number of junior-senior high school teachers to participate in the study. The letter concluded with a choice of four possible responses.

1) I am thrilled that you thought of me but I would rather not participate.
2) I am willing to participate by observing another teacher.
3) I am willing to participate by allowing another teacher to observe me.
4) I am willing to observe and be observed.

The intern hoped to improve the probability of evoking a positive response by including in the letter a list of the other teachers who were solicited. Possibly, if a
teacher saw the name of a friend or colleague on the list, he or she might be more willing to participate and also talk the friend into participating.

The second instrument consisted of a survey (see Appendix) administered to those from the original sample that participated as a peer observer or one who was observed. The list of questions were assembled with the assistance of others particularly Dr. Janet Caldwell of Rowan University. The survey contained ten questions. The first question rated the overall experience on a scale, which included the choices “Excellent”, “Very Worthwhile”, “Worthwhile”, “Somewhat Worthwhile”, and “Not Worthwhile”. The final response was open-ended where participants were asked to comment on the value of their experience. The remaining nine questions were graded on a Likert scale which included the choices “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Undecided”, “Disagree”, and “Strongly Disagree”.

**The Sample**

It was surprisingly difficult to choose the sample. Schedule constraints prohibited the intern from expanding the sample beyond the junior-senior high school. In addition, the necessity of concluding this study by the end of the third quarter of the school year limited choices even further. The intern ultimately selected twenty-eight members of the junior-senior high school faculty. The sample was not a random sample because the intern consciously attempted to achieve diversity with respect to age, experience, gender, and subject matter. The intern addressed the first instrument to each individual personally, sealed it in a personalized envelope, and left the envelope in each individual’s mailbox. After the first survey was returned, the intern met privately after school with
each colleague who volunteered to participate. The intern thanked them in advance and explained the strategy for collecting data.

**Data Collection**

Each volunteer was given a copy of the second instrument, a list of faculty members who offered to observe or be observed, and an envelope bearing the intern’s name. If a volunteer expressed a preference to participate as an observer, the intern explained that he would make himself available to administer a test to the observer’s class during one of the intern’s preparation periods. While the intern was administering that test, the volunteer was free to observe. The intern was particularly grateful to any volunteer who offered to observe a colleague during one of that volunteer’s own preparation periods.

After observing or being observed, each participant was asked to complete the survey, seal it in the envelope that had been provided, and return it to my mailbox.

**Data Analysis**

The first pertinent piece of data was the percentage of positive responses from the original sample. Then, after the observations had been completed and surveys had been received from every participant, the intern attributed a numerical score to each of the multiple-choice responses. “Excellent/Strongly Agree” was scored as 5.0; “Very Worthwhile/Agree” was scored as 4.0; “Worthwhile/Undecided” was scored as 3.0; “Somewhat Worthwhile/Disagree” was scored as 2.0; and “Not Worthwhile/ Strongly Disagree” was scored as 1.0. The intern attached a mean score to each of the multiple-choice questions as a measure of central tendency and reported the responses to the open-ended question verbatim.
Summary

The intern labored under the expectation that this chapter should bear a burden of proof. The requirement of conclusive proof is a formidable task when attached to any premise as a necessary condition. How often can one conclude that sufficient evidence has been gathered to guarantee a truth? While the intern’s argument in behalf of the merits of peer observation was posed as a subjective opinion, the validity of this hypothesis has undergone assessment. Certainly, if a representative sample of this junior-senior high school faculty concurred that the collaboration, which they shared, was a worthwhile experience, then the intern’s hypothesis has achieved a positive consequence and deserves to be examined further.
Chapter 4

First Instrument

The intern was very pleased with the response that he received from the original sample of twenty-eight faculty members in the junior-senior high school. Twenty-four (86%) expressed a willingness to participate in the project. Twenty-two indicated that they were willing to serve as an observer, seventeen indicated that they were willing to be observed, and fourteen indicated that they were willing to serve in either role. Several offered encouragement with a written comment next to their choice of roles:

a) I wish you well.

b) Good idea-count me in.

c) Let me know when you want the observation and survey done.

d) I hope you get enough volunteers.

e) I can observe during my prep period.

One Obstacle

As anticipated, the individual schedule of each volunteer proved to be an insurmountable barrier in many cases. Several teachers wished to pair off with a particular colleague but their schedules conflicted. Some were not available for an observation during first or eighth periods when I was free to cover their class. Others were reluctant to permit me to substitute while they were giving a test because their students could always be expected to ask for clarifications or assistance during a test. Those who could not participate for one reason or another expressed genuine
disappointment in not being able to follow through on the commitment that they had made.

**Second Instrument**

Thirteen teachers participated in the observation process. In a remarkable demonstration of collegiality all of the observers gave up one of their own prep periods in order to complete their task. These generous individuals responded to the survey in the following manner:

Why did you select this class to observe? (Check all that apply)

Content is the same as or similar to what I teach.  8 (Number of selections)
Teacher is in my department.  8
I teach the same students or grade level.  5
I admire this teacher’s knowledge of subject matter.  6
I admire this teacher’s ability to control student behavior.  4
Other (explain):
   a) I always hear interesting lessons as I pass in the hall.
   b) The class is a tough mix. Thought it would be interesting.
   c) A friend – we coach together.
   d) I needed help with a situation and asked this teacher to visit the classroom during that period

1) Please rate the overall value of this experience for yourself.

   Excellent  3
   Very Worthwhile  8
   Worthwhile  2
   Somewhat Worthwhile  0
   Not Worthwhile  0
   Mean = 4.08 (Excellent=5; Very Worthwhile=4)

SA = strongly agree  A = agree  U = undecided  D = disagree  SD = strongly disagree

2) An observer should only visit a member of his/her own department

   SA  0
   A 1
   U 0
   D 8
   SD 4
   Mean = 1.85 (Disagree=2; Strongly Disagree=1)
3) An observer would benefit by observing his/her own students taught by another.

SA 7
A 5
U 0
D 0
SD 1
Mean = 4.31 (Strongly Agree=5; Agree=4)

4) An observer should have a pre-conference with the teacher.

SA 3
A 3
U 3
D 3
SD 1
Mean = 3.31 (Agree=4; Undecided=3)

5) An observer should have a post-conference with the teacher.

SA 7
A 5
U 1
D 0
SD 0
Mean = 4.46 (Strongly Agree=5; Agree=4)

6) An observer should not take notes during the visit.

SA 0
A 0
U 2
D 9
SD 1
Note: One participant wrote in, "? It depends."
Mean = 2.08 (Undecided=3; Disagree=2)

7) An observer should never visit on a Monday or Friday.

SA 2
A 1
U 4
D 5
SD 1
Mean = 2.85 (Undecided=3; Disagree=2)
8) An observer should stay for the entire class period.

| SA | 6 |
| A  | 3 |
| U  | 2 |
| D  | 2 |
| SD | 0 |

Mean = 4.00 (Agree=4)

9) I am likely to repeat this experience if given the opportunity.

| SA | 5 |
| A  | 5 |
| U  | 2 |
| D  | 1 |
| SD | 0 |

Mean = 4.08 (Strongly Agree=5; Agree=4)

10) The teacher who was observed felt less stress than during a formal evaluation.

| SA | 6 |
| A  | 6 |
| U  | 0 |
| D  | 0 |
| SD | 1 |

Note: One participant added, “Peer observation reason for this.”

Mean = 4.23 (Strongly Agree=5; Agree=4)

Additional comments:

a) I would be willing to do a second one.

b) I had a great time.

c) I have more respect for the teaching opinions of my colleagues than my administrators.

d) As a PIP a few years ago I visited teachers in other districts. It was very worthwhile.

e) I would like to see more peer observing. The benefits would help both students and teachers.
f) A pre-conference and post-conference are helpful so the observer knows what to look for. It is beneficial to observe another teacher’s style and maybe you’ll see a technique you haven’t thought of or tried before.

g) Peer observation can be helpful yet not threatening. We can share ideas, offer advice, and learn from each other.

**Interpretation**

The intern believes that the evidence that was gathered confirms the study’s major premise. Teachers recognize, respect, and appreciate the skills and problem solving abilities of their teaching colleagues more than anyone else, including administrators. A closed mind might seek to trivialize this survey as signifying nothing more than a few teachers helping a colleague to finish a research project. The intern believes that the evidence says more than thirteen teachers are generous with their time.

From the moment that the first instrument was returned, the twenty-four respondents who originally volunteered to participate have frequently stopped the intern in the hallways between periods and at meetings to offer that the concept of receiving an opportunity to witness other teachers perform was intriguing. Many looked forward to observing a teacher of a different discipline while others looked forward to observing a colleague who taught the same subject. Significantly, none were afraid to open their classrooms to a colleague. This trust was later exemplified by responses to two of the items on the survey. Twelve of the thirteen respondents agreed, and half of those strongly agreed, that the teacher who was observed felt less stress than during a formal evaluation. Perhaps, more significantly, only three of the thirteen respondents agreed that an observer should never visit on a Monday or Friday. It is the intern’s experience that
very few teachers would invite a formal evaluation on a Monday or Friday due to the fact that many students are less than razor sharp on those two days. Clearly, the opportunity for interaction among comrades through peer observation was appreciated by this sample.
Chapter 5

Conclusions

When the intern first decided to promote the merits of peer observation in his school district through a project proposal, he had formed a number of firm opinions from 32 years of teaching experience. Foremost of these opinions is his belief in the dedication, compassion, generosity, and diligence of professional teachers whom he has known. The intern believes that the research and survey instrument used in this study have supported the arguments expressed in the first two chapters.

Supervisors do have unrealistically positive ideas about their effect on instructional improvement. The classroom teacher would appreciate more help than is presently available. Administrators should create opportunities for teachers to talk with each other constructively. Teachers do respect and admire other teachers whom they deem to be effective and successful communicators. There should be occasions provided where teachers can review their work with students and receive peer reinforcement and advice. The teaching staff would be receptive to the concept of peer observation as a supplement to the current evaluation process.

Implications

The intern sincerely believes that administrators should not feel threatened by faculty interest in or support for peer observation. Peer observation is not a threat to or a replacement for the evaluation process. Peer observation could be a vehicle for improving instruction and learning. Peer observation could be a catalyst for teachers discussing the art of teaching with colleagues. Peer observation might invite teachers of
different disciplines to work cooperatively on the presentation of a lesson. At the very least, peer observation on a voluntary basis would promote a more collegial environment. The intern discovered genuine enthusiasm within the group that volunteered to participate in his study. Two English teachers expressed an interest in observing a lesson taught by a science teacher who was recently selected as Teacher of the Year in the high school. Another English teacher chose to observe a lesson taught by a social studies teacher because “I always hear interesting lessons as I pass (his room).” A home economics teacher who occasionally teaches remedial math to homebound students was eager to observe a lesson taught by a geometry teacher. The intern was pleased to learn that his survey provided an impetus for teachers to observe lessons taught by colleagues whom they have admired but never had an excuse to observe.

**Leadership Development**

The intern is proud to report that no member of the original sample erupted in a fit of laughter when told that the intern aspired to be an educational leader. In fact, one volunteer asked the intern if he (the intern) had received a positive response to his plea for participants in the study. When the intern replied that he was surprised to receive positive responses from 86% of the sample, the volunteer offered, “I’m not surprised because it (the request) came from you.”

The intern taught in one school district for 22 years before moving to New Jersey 10 years ago to assume his present position. He has served in informal leadership positions in both locations. Because he was never offered any support or assistance as a new teacher 32 years ago, the intern has always had a special affinity with new teachers. The intern knows from personal experience that most new teachers survive or fail based
upon the amount of collegial support and encouragement that they receive. Throughout his career the intern is most proud to be known as a teacher to whom any colleague can turn in time of need.

It is as a result of this history that the intern selected peer observation as a thesis topic. The intern is convinced that an appreciated individual is most likely to be a productive individual. A teacher's greatest resource is the faculty to which he or she belongs. When teachers interact with each other, they are more likely to build supportive and nurturing relationships. Teachers who feel supported and nurtured are more likely to become effective and productive teachers. Therefore, it is the opinion of the intern that an effective leader should promote interaction among his faculty and support staff. The intern is pleased that his colleagues have expressed respect for the opinions contained in this study and that many of those same colleagues seem to believe that the study offers evidence of the intern's ability to serve as an effective and considerate leader.

**Organizational Change**

The study's instruments have detected an undeniable interest in the concept of peer observation among the sample population. One tenet was repeated time and again to the intern when he first met with those who offered to take part in the survey process. As one volunteer simply stated, "Teachers should have the opportunity to observe other teachers." The fact that teachers feel isolated during the workday is a reality supported by research. The irony in this situation is that teachers, by nature of their profession, are purveyors of information. Teachers are constantly searching for new ideas and solutions to problems. They are knowledgeable in their field and they are curious about those things with which they are unfamiliar. Teachers are communicators who are stimulated
by interaction and discussion. Also, they are lifelong students of educational psychology and human behavior. Yet, it is painfully evident that, in too many cases, teachers are untapped resources and problem solvers in their own work environment. To starve them through isolation is pure folly. Peer observation is a non-judgmental process that endorses a more collegial working environment.

The intern was pleased to learn that one administrator in his school district has revealed an interest in this study. The intern’s school mentor holds the position of Director of Academic and Community Programs. In that position he has the authority to influence and promote. Presently, he is encouraging teams of elementary teachers to visit other school districts where forms of peer observation have already been implemented.

Further Study

While the intern is optimistic that the opinions expressed by his population sample concur with the premise of this study, he is aware that those opinions reflect only a portion of the total faculty in the junior-senior high school. The intern is hopeful, however, that the findings of this study will prompt further investigation into whether there might be sufficient interest in peer observation among the entire faculty to justify its continuance.

The intern feels compelled to reiterate that this study advocates peer observation not peer evaluation. Peer observation is intended to provide encouragement and support through contact with individuals who share equal status. The process would most certainly expire prematurely if administrators insisted that any portion of the observations were to somehow be incorporated into an observed teacher’s formal evaluation. Peer observation is not offered as a remedy for formal evaluation. Its success is based upon a
free and unrestrained exchange of ideas that are unencumbered by the implied presence of accountability.
References


Appendix

Research Instruments
February 9, 1999

Dear (Name Here),

I am asking for your help. I am trying to complete a Master’s thesis on the topic “Peer Observation as a Supplement to Formal Supervision.” My premise is that the formal evaluation process in many schools fails to address the needs and isolation of the typical classroom teacher. It is my belief that classroom teachers would appreciate an opportunity to share the teaching experience with a colleague of their choice. There is a significant amount of research that supports the argument that teachers profit from the experience of observing or being observed by other teachers particularly when the other teacher is a respected and trusted confidante.

I regret the need for this letter and that I am unable to explain my proposal to you in person. My schedule does not offer the flexibility where I could speak to everyone in a timely manner. I hope that you can appreciate why I would rather not make this plea at a faculty meeting. My immediate dilemma is that I must define a sample in order to generate data from which I may draw conclusions. Therefore, I selected an assortment of names (next page) from a faculty list. I tried to include a cross section that included some friendships and diversity. To be honest I hoped that one teacher might persuade a friend into participating.

If you can find a colleague (on the list or on your own) who would permit you to visit his or her classroom during a lesson, I will substitute for you when you give your next test (I’ll proctor it for you) and give you the freedom to observe the teacher whom you selected. The other teacher might teach the same subject using a different approach, teach the same students with fewer or more discipline problems, or just be a friend whom you respect as a practitioner. I only ask that you and your partner fill out a brief survey after your experiences. I have a prep period at 1st period and I have hall duty during 8th period three days per week. Therefore, I can offer you my availability during 1st and 8th periods if you teach during one of those periods. I don’t expect you to give up one of your own prep periods to observe but, if you do, I will be in your debt. I would hope that I could complete the entire process within four weeks depending upon the number of positive responses. Whichever way you choose to respond thanks for taking the time to read this letter. Those who choose to volunteer will hear from me shortly. Please indicate your response by putting a check next to one answer on the next page, place it in the envelope provided, and return it to my mailbox (or send it to me directly in J25).

Sincerely,
Faculty List:

C. Bauer
K. Beebe
M. Bowe
J. Boyd
M. Budniak
D. Carrera
M. Clark
D. Clement
L. Diaz
F. Erwin
W. Fennal
R. Fitch
C. Garritano
L. Guest
J. Hilferty
T. Hurst
D. Jones
M. Lehnowsky
E. Malaska
G. Miskar
J. Pantoja
J. Pegues
K. Santamore
D. Sternchos
A. Stone
E. Tarquinto
M. Trotta
K. Wert

I am thrilled that you thought of me but I would rather not participate. _____

I am willing to participate by observing another teacher. _____

I am willing to participate by allowing another teacher to observe me. _____

I am willing to observe and be observed. _____

(Signature)
Peer Observation Survey

What was your role? Observer _____ Teacher who was observed _____

Why did you select this class to observe? (Check all that apply)
  Content is the same as or similar to what I teach _____
  Teacher is in my department _____
  I teach the same students or grade level _____
  I admire this teacher’s knowledge of subject matter _____
  I admire this teacher’s ability to control student behavior _____
  Other (explain) _____________________________________________

1) Please rate the overall value of this experience for yourself.
   Excellent _____
   Very worthwhile _____
   Worthwhile _____
   Somewhat worthwhile _____
   Not worthwhile _____

(Circle one) SA = strongly agree  A = agree  U = undecided  D = disagree  SD = strongly disagree

2) An observer should only visit a member of his/her own department.  SA  A  U  D  SD
3) An observer would benefit by observing his/her own students taught by another.  SA  A  U  D  SD
4) An observer should have a pre-conference with the teacher.  SA  A  U  D  SD
5) An observer should have a post-conference with the teacher.  SA  A  U  D  SD
6) An observer should not take notes during the visit.  SA  A  U  D  SD
7) An observer should never visit on a Monday or Friday.  SA  A  U  D  SD
8) An observer should stay for the entire class period.  SA  A  U  D  SD
9) I am likely to repeat this experience if given the opportunity.  SA  A  U  D  SD
10) The teacher who was observed felt less stress than during a formal evaluation.  SA  A  U  D  SD

Comments:_________________________________________________________________________________
## Biographical Data

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