Principal Perceptions of Walkthrough Effectiveness

Teresa Martin Starrett
Texas Woman's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, and the Educational Leadership Commons

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol10/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in School Leadership Review by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.
**Principal Perceptions of Walkthrough Effectiveness**

*Teresa Martin Starrett*  
*Texas Woman's University*

Teacher quality is the most important school level factor affecting student achievement. There is a direct correlation between effective instruction provided by highly qualified teachers and increased student achievement (Colvin & Johnson, 2007).

In order to ensure students have the most effective teachers, administrators must act as instructional leaders. Specifically, it falls upon them to focus on professional development, monitor and assess the teaching process and create a positive school climate (Gulcan, 2012). While there is much discussion regarding what characterizes an effective teacher, all are in agreement that an effective teacher provides students with positive outcomes—both socially and academically. One of the most important tasks of a principal is the supervision of instruction. For the purpose of this study, a walkthrough is defined as a short 3-5 minute structured review by a campus principal or his or her designee to gain information regarding teacher efficacy (Downey, et al., 2004). Specifically, an effective classroom walkthrough includes:

- components that are informal and brief,
- involving the principal and/or other administrators, other instructional leaders, and teachers,
- quick snapshots of classroom activities (particularly instructional and curricular practices),
- not intended for formal teacher evaluation purposes,
- focused on “look-fors” that emphasize improvement in teaching and learning,
- an opportunity to give feedback to teachers for reflection on their practice,
- having the improvement of student achievement as its ultimate goal

(Kachur et al., 2010, p. 3).

The results of these walkthroughs may be used formatively to identify specific needs for professional development or summatively, with a formal observation, for decisions related to employment and retention. Although walkthroughs and observations provide

---

*1 Dr. Teresa Martin Starrett* can be reached at tstarrett@twu.edu.
data for supervisors, the data collected is very useful to principal leaders in determining what can be done to improve the school.

Tyler, et. al. (2010) state observed that consistent evaluation of teaching could encourage educators to be more self reflective and provide more opportunities for conversations with other teachers and administrations about effective practices in the classroom. They found teachers are more effective at raising student achievement during the school year when they are being evaluated and even more effective in the years after formal evaluation. This teacher effectiveness was evaluated through the use of student assessment scores on math achievement on standardized test scores in the corresponding years. The researchers pose the feedback the supervision programs offer provide teachers with skills that directly correlate with student achievement.

As a result of professional development driven by walkthroughs and observations, either formal or informal, teacher performance should be enhanced; thus, student achievement will invariably improve. Optimally, professional development should be collaboratively chosen by teacher and administrator in response to gaps in teacher training, an effort to increase skills and put practice into place (Kalule & Bouchamma, 2013).

According to a survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2009), 13% of teachers reported they did not receive any appraisal or feedback. Of the teachers who received no appraisal or feedback, just under 25% were in their first year of teaching and 37% were in their first two years at the school. Conversely, nearly half of all the teachers who responded indicated school leaders used effective methods to evaluate their performance. These teachers indicated they appreciated feedback from school leaders and were more likely to focus on priorities as outlined in evaluations. Obviously, the supervision of instruction falls soundly to the school leader. As evidenced above, however, this frequently does not take place in a systematic way. In order to understand the perceptions of school leaders in regards to supervision, the researcher surveyed multiple Texas school leaders to determine their perceptions about school walkthroughs and their use and effectiveness.

Looney (2011) recommends teacher evaluations be based upon multiple measurements. She states a clearer picture emerges through the uses of multiple observations by competent peers that allow for an opportunity to observe characteristics such as relationships with students, how teachers communicate expectations for student performance and how they guide formation of values.

Methodology

For this study, 20 Texas schools were randomly chosen to participate by using the state of Texas AskTed database of publicly accessed directory material. From this list, a variety of leaders were randomly chosen from the following: rural, suburban, urban, elementary, middle, high school. These leaders were then sent an email invitation asking them to participate in the study gauging their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of
walkthroughs as a supervision tool. If they agreed to participate, they were asked to complete an online survey. The survey was housed in PsychData, a company that provides secure, online surveys. Six school leaders chose to participate in the study by completing the survey.

Leaders responded to demographic information regarding years as a leader and years serving on current campus. Additionally, they responded to eight open-ended questions as follows:

1. Define walkthrough.
2. What is your experience with supervision of instruction?
3. How frequently do you conduct walkthroughs?
4. What do you believe are the benefits of walkthroughs?
5. What do you believe are the constraints of walkthroughs?
6. What is the purpose of supervision of staff?
7. What feedback do you provide?
8. How can walkthroughs be used to improve instruction?

Results were then compiled and a qualitative approach was used to analyze responses for themes.

Results

In response to the question regarding years experience, participants reported an average of 13 years experience with a range of 5 to 24 years in school leadership. Respondents represented leaders from buildings that ranged in size from 176 through 800 and represented elementary, middle and high school. Respondents indicated ratings for participating schools as either met standard (83.3%) or not rated (16.6%).

Classroom walkthroughs are defined as short, focused, and informal observations of students’ involvement in the lesson, instructional strategies utilized by the teacher, and the climate of the classroom (Downey, et al., 2004). Generally, a walkthrough is thought of a short, focused formal or informal observation that is used to cumulatively gather data regarding teacher performance and provide feedback. When asked for a working definition of walkthrough, the study participants responded in a variety of ways.

Walkthrough defined

When asked to define the term “walkthrough”, responses varied slightly. However, school leaders agreed these functioned as a snapshot of a teacher’s instruction, student engagement and expectations within the classroom. According to responses, administrators spend an average of 3-15 minutes looking at clearly defined objectives focusing on state and district standards. The data gathered during the walkthroughs was then compiled cumulatively over the course of the school year to provide a clearer view to “provide feedback about positives, areas of growth, consideration, or next steps.” Specifically, the consensus was that administrators must have a plan when conducting
walkthroughs. One administrator indicated a need to be purposeful and truly target a specific area since the entire lesson is not seen.

When asked about overall experience with supervision of instruction, administrators responded with a positive view of walkthroughs and stated they made them a priority. The respondents indicated supervision of instruction as one of the main goals as an instructional leader on campus. Another supported Keruskin’s (2005) assertion that supervision creates accountability and correlates to improved instruction. Interestingly, one school leader stated it succinctly as, “You have to inspect what you expect.”

Effective communication between an administrator and teacher is an essential building block to growth for teachers. Supporting this, one principal surveyed indicated walkthroughs are a wonderful tool for dialogue between the teacher and administrator. They give the principal an opportunity to celebrate, share ideas, and challenge the teacher to become the best he/she can be.

**Number of walkthroughs conducted**

The frequency of supervision varies from campus to campus. Frequent walkthroughs and observations are an integral part of the improvement of teacher efficacy as schools where principals employed this model showed evidence of an increase in student achievement over a traditional evaluation system (Payne, 2010). Discussion continues, however, regarding what the correct number is. There is no agreement in the literature regarding the frequency of walkthroughs, but they should provide ongoing instruction related feedback to teachers (Ayers, 2005). When asked about the frequency of their walkthroughs, the responses varied widely three or more to over 100. The average number of walkthroughs per teacher reported was 22 per year.

**Benefits and constraints**

When asked about the benefits of walkthroughs, the true beliefs of these school leaders came through. Many cited the end result as improved instruction and student achievement. According to Keruskin (2005), teachers whose principals conduct frequent walkthroughs have improved attitudes regarding formal teacher evaluation, instruction improves, and student achievement increases.

While often it is difficult to blend research and practice, supervision is an area in which it is essential to cross these lines. One leader stated, “….accountability… utilizing best practices and getting feedback that promotes growth.” Another leader stressed the use of high quality feedback, “If you just walk in and provide feedback on what you are seeing, this probably isn’t a lot of benefit.” Still another leader reiterated the use of constant, ongoing, consistent feedback. In order to provide an opportunity to grow and extend learning, educators must have an opportunity to reflect on practice and feedback provides for such. Liu and Mulfinger (2011) recommend frequent feedback stating this is often too infrequent and not constructive in nature.
Overwhelmingly, school leaders agree walkthroughs and supervision are essential pieces to teacher improvement and student success. However, constraints exist and often impair an administrator’s ability to plan accordingly. These barriers are reported by Bessellieu (2008), as lack of time, interruptions, unpreparedness and unexpected requests.

The survey participants reported similar barriers. Time was the overwhelming reported constraint. School leaders are responsible for a variety of tasks including student safety, scheduling, parent relationships, facility management, budgeting and the supervision of instruction is just one item among them. Additionally, leaders are often called upon to attend meetings outside of the school building; therefore, their contact hours available are limited. According to a Wallace foundation study (Wallace, 2009), when asked how much time spent on instruction, most principals respond roughly 70% and 30% on management tasks. However, when principals are observed and their time spent on tasks is analyzed, the percentages are actually reversed. This same survey found leaders spend roughly 30% of their time on instruction and 70% on management tasks. In order to make supervision a priority, they must be willing to delegate management tasks. One strategy is to utilize a School Administration Manager (SAM) who takes the principal’s most time-consuming management tasks thus allowing the principal to concentrate on instruction.

Another constraint reported was the narrow picture walkthroughs present. One leader indicated conclusions- good or bad- could be drawn from a quick visit that would not be drawn from a complete lesson cycle. Another leader echoed this stating one must be strategic in approaching walkthroughs by being aware of the timing within a lesson. This snapshot effect would be solved if multiple walkthroughs were conducted putting together a comprehensive picture of instruction, thus creating a more complete picture. On each campus, there was shared responsibility for the walkthroughs for teachers. Walkthroughs were conducted by assistant principals, instructional leaders, principals, and in one case the superintendent.

**Purpose of Supervision and feedback**

When asked about the purpose of supervision of staff, the leaders agree that the overarching goal was an improvement of staff performance resulting in positive student achievement. Specifically, one leader stated a need to provide students a learner-centered environment that fosters collaboration and critical thinking. Another shared the purpose of supervision is to ensure a high quality rigorous environment with bell-to-bell instruction. This leader echoes the three areas Marzano (2003) states must be in place in order for student success to occur: high quality instruction, classroom management and an aligned curriculum. Through this response, this leader indicates supervision must ensure teachers are following standards and providing great instruction, classroom management is effective, and that climate and culture of the classroom is consistent with the school vision.
According to Hopkins (2008), one of the most important components of effective supervision is providing feedback and the opportunity for professional development. When asked what feedback they provided teacher with after walkthroughs, these principals indicated the key was simply ensuring this feedback was, indeed, followed through upon. It did look different from case to case, however. Some leaders met individually with teachers and asked for reflection on the lesson. Specifically, “… what they thought went well and what they feel they struggle with… then I tell them what I saw that was awesome, and what might need tweaking. It is very non-threatening.” Others approach with a positive/negative approach providing an area in which the teacher did well and another in which they might need additional refinement. These school leaders had various ways of referring to this technique including: “praise-polish-praise”, “reinforcement-refinement” and “positives-needed growth”.

Other leaders utilized a computerized system that provided feedback through the school’s online system. Teachers are then able to access this information to determine areas of improvement. Prior walkthroughs are then used for comparison data for future walkthrough visits to determine whether areas of concern have been addressed.

**Walkthroughs to improve instruction**

In regards to how walkthroughs can be used to improve instruction, one leader indicated data can be tracked to determine trends. Patterns and concerns related to instruction can more easily be identified, school principals can demonstrate their interest in what is occurring in the classroom, and a basis for reflective dialogue can be established through the use of an informal observation process (Waite, 2007).

If a negative trend is found, it can be utilized to improve instruction. If positive trends are found, those teachers can be tapped to provide professional development as an instructional coach. According to one leader, when a teacher is doing a great job in a certain area, they are asked to share the practice with their Professional Learning Community (DeFour, 2006). “Teachers learn best from each other and they enjoy sharing so it benefits all students.” On the same campus, if a teacher is in need of assistance, an instructional coach is sent to offer more assistance. It is through the walkthroughs that a snapshot emerges. This snapshot provides a needs assessment allows the leadership to design professional development that best meets each teacher’s needs. This belief is echoed by another leader who states, “All teachers want to be good at what they do, but they don’t necessarily know what they are doing isn’t working or isn’t the best, but through feedback they are able to see the flaws in their methodology.” In reviewing the recommended cycle of observation and evaluation, Kalule & Bouchamma (2013) stress the importance of providing teachers with the opportunity to reflect on strengths and weaknesses with guided questioning by a skilled instructional leader. All leaders who responded indicated a need for post observation coupled with opportunities for reflection.
Overwhelmingly, school leaders placed great emphasis on frequent walkthroughs, teacher feedback and reflection. Through the use of these tools, an improvement in teaching will occur. When teaching improves, the end result is student growth and achievement.

References


