



Classroom observation as an instrument for school development: School principals' perspectives on its relevance and problems



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ABSTRACT

Classroom observation can have diagnostic, evaluative and counseling purposes and can be regarded as a traditional instrument for the processes that are planned for school development. However, the evaluative character of classroom observation can also be interpreted as a controlling measure and therefore, lead to stress and fear in the observed individuals. This might bring about resistance against the feedback which results from classroom observation. In order to be able to focus on the useful aspects and the benefits of classroom observation, it is important to understand which factors make the instruments of classroom observation credible and reliable for the teachers who are being observed. It is central to our current topic to understand the specific criticism concerning the area of teaching and learning within a school inspection and to work out the factors which contribute to the credibility of classroom observations on one hand, and the factors which reduce it on the other hand. For this purpose, we analyzed the statements of fifty school principals on classroom observation taken from overall interviews concerning the expectations of those principals towards school inspections in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The results clearly indicate that classroom observation is a critical process for teachers. Not being able to observe the classroom credibly can have several negative effects. Therefore, this research concentrates on ways that can improve the credibility of classroom observation.

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1. Introduction

An individuals' self-reflection is an essential precondition for the learning process (Espasa & Meneses, 2010; Shute, 2008). The quality of teaching and school lessons can be improved through a critical and systematic assessment of one's own performance in relation to certain goals (Schraw, Crippen & Hartley, 2006). Self-reflection processes of teachers are important foundations to guarantee a higher quality of teaching and lessons because they can show the need for changes and adjustments in organizing the process of teaching and educational settings. This insight, although already mentioned in older literature is still an urgent goal of teacher education (Behnke, 2015; Steins, Haep & Wittrock, 2015).

Without an inventory and a valid description of the status quo, target-oriented changes in teaching remain an ineffective endeavor. This paper intends to firstly name arguments for the necessity of an external feedback. In the following, difficulties which are

connected to external evaluations and their results will be described. Both aspects lead to the empirical question which deals with the pros and cons of external classroom observation: It is intended to work out the factors which contribute to the credibility of classroom observations on one hand and the factors which reduce it on the other hand. The results will be discussed on the basis of the question how the acceptance of external classroom observations can be increased in order to secure an increased usage of feedback.

2. External classroom observation: why it is necessary

Self-reflections, which are induced through the individual's own observation or introspective measures, carry the risk of bearing the falsification of reality. It is very unlikely for human beings to succeed in realistic self-perceptions, although special instructions in a laboratory situation have been found to improve the ability of a realistic self-perception significantly (e.g. Regan & Totten, 1975). Further results state that human beings have a certain awareness of their distorted perceptions and therefore, these kinds of perceptions do not necessarily have to occur (Krueger, Ham & Linford, 1996). Observer-actor-effects (Krueger et al., 1996), self-serving biases (Tesser, 1988) and many additional

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universal, social and human processes of perception hinder an objective cognition and may lead to routine-blindness (Landes & Steiner, 2013).

Teachers are no exception when it comes to the processes mentioned above. They tend to underestimate the relevance of their own work and its impact on students. In addition, they evaluate their teaching quality divergently to the assessment of the students (Hattie, 2009).

It can be expected that a realistic self-perception in everyday school life is not always possible for all teachers. Teachers are more likely to receive informal positive feedback than negative feedback from students and their parents, since negative feedback is unlikely to reach the top of the hierarchy (Forsyth, 2013; Smith & Fortunato, 2008). Informal feedback from parents, teachers and colleagues is moreover potentially never to be parted from the interests of the sender of the message and can, for example, result in flattery or compliments (Gordon, 1996; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010; Vonk, 2002).

Feedback sources can definitely be found in everyday school life, but these are often very unsystematic and vague. Therefore, external classroom observation is necessary in order to give the single teacher as well as the whole school an overview of their teaching quality and help them, to develop the quality of teaching toward a positive direction. Thus, an external classroom observation may help to validate one's own internal observations and the whole school.

3. Dealing with external classroom observation

Research on feedback explicitly shows that people tend to avoid negative feedback, whenever they have the opportunity to do so (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Whenever the avoidance of negative feedback is not possible, its relevance or credibility might be reduced in order to secure the individuals' self-worth. One option to lessen negative feedback is to question the credibility of the sender (Behnke, 2015). The feedback is then trivialized as unqualified, because the credibility and attribution of expertise are closely connected (Gray, Andermann & O'Connell, 2011). Furthermore, the manner of the acknowledgement can be criticized and attacked so that the content appears unreliable and implausible (Tenney, Small, Kondrad, Jaswal & Spellman, 2011). The above mentioned the defensive strategies that can lead to an attitude and atmosphere in which feedback is most likely to be ignored.

Numerous research findings show that many teachers do not welcome external classroom observation (Brimblecombe, Ormston & Shaw, 1995). Reasons for this attitude are multiplex (Bitan, Haep & Steins, 2015). External classroom observation may reduce the freedom of the individual teacher to conduct "his/her" lessons as he/she prefers and believes is best and therefore may induce reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The reduced freedom is then regained through not taking part in the observation at all or by trivializing the resulting feedback. By any means, an external classroom observation will lead to feelings of anger and resentment within the teacher. Furthermore, a teacher who estimates his/her teaching skills as low, may experience fear and stress consequent to the external classroom observation (Komp, 1989). People can use various possibilities in order to protect their self-worth in such a situation (Tesser, 1988); most of them lead to devaluation of the feedback results.

Reactance and fear are responses to external classroom observations, which can be classified as dysfunctional from the perspective and aim of a progressive school development. Nevertheless, these responses hint at specific problems which are responsible for the fact that feedback is not implemented and that it remains unappreciated. This fact is regrettable both in

content-related and economic points of view. For those who operate as external classroom evaluators and give feedbacks, it is not easy to differentiate between dysfunctional and functional criticism concerning classroom observation and its instruments.

4. Our research

The difficulties which are connected to an external classroom observation for the observed teachers shall be presented using the example of the school inspection in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). School inspection is referred to as Quality Analysis in NRW. Quality Analysis in this federal state is a mandatory external evaluation. School inspectors in NRW work with evaluation criteria, which are depicted by a quality index representing six different school areas. These areas are: Professionalism, aims and strategies, school results, leadership and school management, school culture, teaching and learning. They are differentiated into 28 quality aspects, which are depicted by 150 quality criteria. Within two to three days of a school visit, the school inspectors observe at least 50% of the lessons, respectively twenty minutes of the chosen lesson, and evaluate their observations guided by the criteria.

The acceptance of school inspection by schools before actually experiencing it, is subject to an analysis, which has already been conducted and in which we could show that 41% of the interviewed principals who were expecting school inspection had negative attitudes towards quality analysis, whereas 38% voiced a positive and 21% a neutral position (Bitan et al., 2015).

Negative attitudes were particularly characterized by generalizing negative depictions as well as disastrous future expectations, but also rational criticism concerning the procedures of school inspection could be detected. It is central to our current topic to understand the specific criticism of the interviewed principals concerning the area of school inspection, which is the main work of teachers, namely the area of "teaching and learning". This area is categorized into five categories consisting different criteria, for example: The category "The teacher is supporting the student in an active learning process" is apprehended by six criteria such as "Students have the opportunity to work autonomously and they are supported by the teacher in their work process".

The feedback of the school inspectors is given in a systemic way, meaning that teachers do not get a feedback individually but rather the school as a whole.

Principals were interviewed about the complete quality index in an open form. Thus it is possible to examine which areas of the quality index have a central relevance for school principals. The significance, which is ascribed to a certain topic, ought to be apprehended by analyzing the proportion of statements made concerning the topic in the interview. It is essential for the current article to work out the factors which contribute to the credibility of classroom observation on one hand and the factors which reduce it on the other hand.

5. Method

5.1. Setting and procedure

We collected our data with focused interviews in face-to-face situations. As a stimulus, we chose the aims, the procedures' time line and the objectives of school inspection as the main topics. For each of the topics, all the principals were asked to express their opinions and points of view.

All interviews took place at schools in which the respondents worked, with one exception: One principal wanted to lead the conversation in the office at the university. All interviews were conducted by a female interviewer (25 years) who had passed her

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