

Middle and High School Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Observation Practice

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Abstract This study compared middle and high school teachers' perceptions toward existing classroom observation practices. Teachers' attitudes regarding classroom observation practices were analyzed on four dimensions: instructional improvement, purpose, professional trust, and reflective thinking. The participants were from five school districts in Long Island, New York. A survey instrument that included 37 items was delivered to 90 high school teachers and 72 middle school teachers. The results indicated that middle school teachers experienced more instructional improvement, purpose, and reflective thinking during the observation process. However, in the area of trust, no difference between middle and high schools was found.

Purpose

Identifying a purpose to the observation process is an important aspect to middle school reform. Support and encouragement to grow professionally is an advantage that middle school teachers use. In middle schools, the observation process is meaningful and used as a professional development technique. Rather than being perceived as simply a task that needs to be completed, the middle school teachers in this study take advantage of the observation process and use it as a development opportunity.

The ability for middle school teachers to engage in reflective thinking during the observation practice is advantageous to their growth and development. It also reinforces the fact that middle school teachers are more likely to engage in collaborative and collegial discussions with their observers and supervisors. School improvement practices must include the ability for teachers to reflect on their work. This includes examining not only instructional techniques, but also the work produced by the students. Middle schools have been successful in their reform efforts because of their teachers' ability to self reflect and monitor their practices.

Literature Review

Middle School philosophy differs greatly from High School philosophy. Middle level instruction focuses on a more flexible, interdisciplinary approach to instruction. Teachers have the opportunity to work more collaboratively, thereby creating a sense of community (Heck, 2003). High schools tend to be larger and are more departmentalized. Middle schools subscribe to the teaming approach. Teaming allows for more articulation between teachers. Common planning time promotes the opportunity for curricula integration.

Nelson et al. (2007) conducted a study that explored the key components found in three successful middle schools. The study was based on the 7 correlates used in the Effective Schools Research. The correlates are as follows: safe and orderly environment, climate of high expectations for success, instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, opportunity to learn and student time on task, frequent monitoring of student progress and home-school relations. Researchers conducted an analysis of student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test. Over a period of 6 years, each school showed progress in at least 6 out of 7 target areas.

Although each school was different, there were certain elements that were evident in all three schools. Each school had intimate knowledge of their academic status in comparison to state averages. The schools encouraged a healthy sense of competitiveness (Nelson et al., p.63). They believed that this enabled members of the school community to understand that each person plays an important role in school success. The schools devoted a considerable amount of money to professional development. The staff members in each building worked collaboratively to ensure student success. Teachers monitored those students who were in need of additional academic support and provided them with the tools to achieve academic proficiency. Although teachers wanted all students to perform well, they motivated their students to be competitive (Nelson et al., 2007).

Heck (2003), states that there are key elements that middle and high schools should exhibit: flexible schedules, integrated curricula, interdisciplinary instruction, service learning, and character education. It is also imperative that teachers recognize the importance of teaching students rather than subject matter. Heck (2003) suggests that schools create smaller teams that promote interdisciplinary instruction, thereby enabling students to establish more meaningful connections with their teachers and the subject matter that is being taught.

Wraga (1999) cites several flaws of the comprehensive high school. Many high schools lack a commitment to the social development of students. Teachers are often viewed as workers on an assembly line who must produce finished products that have satisfied specific requirements. The comprehensive high school can be large and impersonal and often does not encourage interdisciplinary instruction.

Breunlin et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of personalizing large comprehensive high schools. This can be accomplished by creating small learning communities. Breunlin et al. (2005) highlight several elements that enable large comprehensive high schools to meet the needs of their students: positive peer relationships with teachers and peers, an environment of safety and respect, varied learning opportunities that focus on multiple intelligences, learning information that is relevant and learning tasks that require higher order thinking skills.

At this point there are no studies on the difference between the middle and high school observation process.

Research Design and Methodology

This study was conducted on Long Island, New York. It has a population of approximately 1,475,888 people of multiethnic backgrounds (Suffolk County QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau). Nassau County occupies the western portion of Long Island, New York. It has a population of about 1,334,641 inhabitants (Nassau County QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau). There are a total of 137 school districts in Suffolk and Nassau County. The five districts in this study have a student population in grades K-12 of 24,543 collectively.

This study was guided by the following research question:

How do middle and high school teachers differ in their attitudes towards the existence of classroom observation practices by observers on four dimensions: instructional improvement, purpose, professional trust, and reflective thinking?

Definition of Terms

Instructional Improvement. Card (2006) defined instructional improvement as a framework for which a lesson is developed during the pre-conference, assessed during the observation, and evaluated and discussed during the post-conference.

Purpose. Purpose was defined as teachers' feelings of support and encouragement in growth (Smalt, 1997).

Professional Trust. From Smalt's (1997) survey instrument, professional trust includes expressing one's feelings honestly and maintain confidentiality.

Reflective Thinking. Reflective thinking is defined as "the practice of documenting or discussing the quality or artifacts of a teacher's work that focuses on improvement" (Card, 2006, p. 7).

The participants of this study were 90 high school teachers and 72 middle school teachers from five schools on Long Island, New York. The Teachers' Analysis of Their Principals' Evaluation Style (TAPES) developed by Smalt (1997) and modified by Ginsberg (2003) was used by Card (2006). An independent samples t test was conducted to evaluate the differences between middle and high school teachers' perceived experiences in instructional improvement, purpose, professional trust and reflective thinking during the observation process.

Data Analysis and Findings

An independent samples t test was conducted to evaluate the differences between middle and high school teachers' perceived experiences in instructional improvement, purpose, professional trust, and reflective thinking during classroom observations. This measured the presence of observation processes that promotes instructional improvement, purpose, professional trust and reflective thinking. Utilizing Levine's test for equality of variances, if the $p < .05$, we referred to equal variances not assumed, if $p > .05$ we referred to equal variances assumed.

Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Independent sample t Test ($N_H = \sim 86$, $N_M = \sim 70$)

	M_H	M_M	SD_H	SD_M	t	df	p
Instructional Imp.	34.705	40.923	9.784	6.546	-4.371	141	.000
Purpose	19.861	21.486	5.180	4.390	-2.085	154	.039
Professional Trust	20.198	20.941	3.792	3.871	-1.179	141.532	.240
Reflective Thinking	26.278	30.231	8.519	6.939	-3.109	145.321	.002

Instructional Improvement. The t test was significant $t(141)=-4.37$, $p=.000$, the mean responses indicate ($M_M=40.923$, $M_H=34.705$) middle school teachers reported they have experienced significantly higher instructional improvement than high school teachers. Considering that raw scores range 10-50, 10 almost never, 20 seldom, 30 sometimes, 40 frequently, 50 almost always, middle school teachers had experienced instructional improvement “frequently” during part of their observation practices, while high school teachers reported experiencing this “sometimes”.

Purpose. The t test was significant $t(154)=-2.085$, $p=.039$, the mean responses indicate that middle school teachers ($M_H=19.861$, $M_M=21.486$) experience significantly higher instructional purpose. Considering that raw scores range 5-25, 5 almost never, 10, seldom, 15, sometimes, 20 frequently, 25 almost always. Note that middle and high school teachers experienced purpose “frequently”.

Trust. The t test was not significant $t(141.532)=-1.179$, $p=.240$. Considering that raw scores raw score range 5-25, 5 almost never, 10, seldom, 15, sometimes, 20 frequently, 25 almost always, middle and high school teachers ($M_M=20.941$, $M_H=20.941$) experienced trust “frequently”.

Reflective Thinking. The t tests was significant $t(145.321)=-3.109$, $p=.002$, the mean responses indicate that middle school teachers ($M_M=30.231$, $M_H=26.278$) experience significantly higher reflective thinking. Considering that raw scores range 8-40, 8 almost never, 16 seldom, 24, sometimes, 32 frequently, 40 almost always, middle school teachers experience reflective thinking “frequently” during the observation process, while high school teacher only experience this “sometimes”.

Discussion

Middle school teachers were found to experience instructional improvement, purpose, and reflective thinking more than high school teachers during the observation process. These findings reinforce that middle school reform practices center around collegiality, team work and the use of learning communities. Middle school teachers were found to use the observation process as a means of instructional improvement. This leads to the conclusion that the pre and post conference with an observer in middle schools is beneficial and leads to improvements in practice. The observation as a vehicle to instructional improvement is another way that middle school teachers collaborate and grow as a community.

The middle school teachers in this study identified that the observation process is purposeful and can lead to instructional improvement. In order for true reform to take place in higher grades, the high school teachers in this study must begin to think outside of their typical

approach to lesson planning and become more open to the idea of using the observation process as a means of collaboration and learning. Future studies should seek out to identify obstacles and challenges that prevent this collaborative learning from occurring. High school reform can only take shape when researchers can identify and overcome possible road blocks to improvement.

The effort of high schools to engage in reform practices has been slow. The results of this study reinforce that high schools are less likely to utilize observation practices to improve pedagogy and instructional techniques. If high schools are to truly engage in reform practices, they must utilize the observation as a means to growth and improvement. Just as middle school teachers, high school teachers must have collegial discussions on lesson development and teaching techniques.

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