

Observing with Equity

We sometimes assume that the traditional approach to classroom observation works for all teachers — but it doesn't. Consider the following to create a more equitable approach to classroom and teacher observation:



1. Know that identity & power matter in observation:

Because of their identities and their experiences both inside and outside of the institution, members of marginalized groups may experience observation in more threatening and loaded ways than those with non-marginalized identities. What may seem for some like a chance to observe success in action could be seen by others as one more opportunity to gather data to use against them. Throughout the observation process, pay attention to identity and power dynamics as they affect teacher, administrator, and students.

2. Seek “double-transparency”:

Endeavor to make the school's “way” transparent: explicitly state educational philosophies and classroom expectations. Members of marginalized groups may be less likely to have internalized the norms and styles of an independent school, and their pedagogy may be rooted in different cultural assumptions and practices that are just as valid but less familiar to your institution. When preparing to observe, be clear about your reasons for observing and what you are going to be looking for. For transparency on the other side, make sure to give the teacher the opportunity to provide background and context for what will happen in the classroom.

3. See teachers in all their humanity:

Build a relationship before the observation, getting to know the teacher as a whole person. Teaching is a profession that requires us to bring our whole selves to the work, so respecting teachers in an observation means attempting to see them as whole people. Learn the ways that they see their identities connected to their teaching. Building trust in this way not only leads to the observer having more context for what they will see in the classroom, it also decreases the threat experienced by teachers being observed.

4. Treat each observation as a single moment:

Be wary of “attribution error”: the assumption that something we see in an observation is representative of the teacher's practice, when in fact it could be the result of an off day or unique situation. This is especially significant for members of marginalized groups, who have often lived their whole lives under stereotype threat. Consider all of the dynamics - at school and in the world - that may be at play when you are observing on that particular day. Observe all teachers regularly to build a clearer understanding of their standard practice. *continued on next page >>*



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5. Be attuned to your own biases:

We all carry assumptions about what an effective classroom “should” look like. Interrogate your own ideas regularly. Do you believe that effective teaching looks a certain way based on research and evidence, or because that practice is something you have been acculturated to prefer? Use journaling, and collaborative inquiry repeatedly over time to check your biases and assumptions.

6. Fight bias and subjectivity with structure:

Open-ended observation provides fertile ground for subjectivity and bias. Look for ways to structure your observations with “look-for” statements and “observables”, lists of observation criteria that are aligned to school-wide values and priorities. Share these openly and transparently with teachers before the observation occurs and use that in your debriefing of the observation with them..

7. Interpret, inquire, and learn together after the fact:

An observation is a starting point, not an endpoint. Use the data collected as an opportunity to collaboratively learn about teaching practice and to inform the teacher’s professional growth goals. Wrapping up an observation with a growth-oriented, supportive inquiry – where the teacher is a respected participant – can go a long way to decreasing the feeling of threat a member of a marginalized group might feel during an observation. An empowering and relationship-building way to end an observation’s debrief is to identify something you learned or reflected on for your own self as a result of having observed the teacher.

