

Lesson observation in Hong Kong schools - Review and prospects

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Abstract

Lesson observation is often seen as serving different purposes by education officials, principals, teachers, researchers and the public. This paper discusses these diverse views, the merits and shortcomings of observation alongside its impact on student behaviour, teaching creativity, fairness, reliability and teacher perception in an educational system which is undergoing major reforms. Suggestions are given for improving the development of observers' expertise as well as teachers' professional ability and attitudes. Alternative approaches like lesson study, 'unseen' observations and the use of video technology are analysed in relation to the understanding of lessons and teachers' classroom practices, and then discussed with respect to the implications for research into their value and the training of observers. In conclusion, while observation can be a useful monitoring tool, observers should be eclectic and select approaches according to their effectiveness in the enhancement of staff collaboration and reflection, teachers' professional development and student characteristics.

Keywords

evaluation of lesson observation, external school review, principals as role models, enhancement of teaching effectiveness, alternative observation approaches

Educational reforms worldwide (like the "Education Reform Act 1988" in the United Kingdom and the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" in the United States) are often a response of governments to public dissatisfaction about the "productivity" of their school systems. Hong Kong is no exception to this trend. The Educational Reform for instance was implemented in 2001 following a series of complaints from the business sector about

the language standards and workplace performance of school and university graduates (Evans, 2000; Lin, 1996) and other increasingly vocal calls for enhancing the effectiveness of education professionals in helping students prepare for life and work (Cheng, 2009). As a part of this reform, external school reviews (ESR) were introduced with respect to learning and teaching quality, student performance, ethos and student support, as well as administration and organisation in many ways similar to those taken by the Office for Standards in Education in the United Kingdom (Haynes, Wragg, & Wikely, 2002; Beere, 2012; Education Bureau, 2013; O’Leary, 2014).

Lesson observations in Hong Kong schools were hitherto confined to student teachers and in-service teachers enrolled in professional degree courses, teachers of under-performing classes and teachers seeking promotion. Following the introduction of ESR, continuous observations are introduced in the hope that teachers can help students achieve more if they are conscious of the strengths and weaknesses in their own practices and can follow the advice of the reviewers closely. This paper analyses the merits and shortcomings of the approaches widely used so far. It also examines the alternatives which might bring improvements, identifies the implications for research and discusses how lesson observation can be implemented with good effects.

Nature of lesson observation

Lesson observation literally means that teaching and learning in the classroom are monitored closely by on-site observers (e.g. Marriott, 2001; Good & Brophy, 2008; O’Leary, 2014). It is often conducted in the context of in-service training and continuous professional development, study of student performance, curriculum development and evaluation, job analysis and teacher appraisal exercises (Wragg, 2012), and may be taken under an evaluation, development or peer review model as what Gosling (2002) has recognised. Attention, where appropriate, can be directed to the understanding of teacher and student interaction, assessment of the cost-effectiveness of the education efforts delivered, identification of a basis for professional development and/or analysis of how lessons are conducted. Although the first aim is likely to be the focus of all observers, each of the other areas may be given greater importance by different stakeholders. Government officials are likely to emphasize the second and consider observation as a means of measuring the worthiness of teachers’ work according to a value-for-money approach. Principals may think similarly because of their accountability to their school management committees and the need to promote publicity to current and prospective parents (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006). Subject heads as middle managers would take observation as part of their everyday duties for overseeing colleagues’ teaching quality, enhancing their professional development and helping students achieve higher in internal and public examinations (Troen, Boles, Pinnolis, & Scheur, 2014). Teachers on their part are expected to use the observation feedback for self-reflection and improvement, and even

for conducting action research about the effectiveness of their teaching approaches and evaluating how they can help students learn better during the lesson (Skinner, 2010).

Lesson observation on its own is valuable to stakeholders in at least three ways. At the macro- or system level, education officials could have a firm basis for monitoring and maintaining school performance in the territory and checking how far their policies have been effectively implemented. At the meso- or local level, going into classrooms gives principals first-hand opportunities to learn about the overall teaching and learning quality in their schools, the patterns of resource usage as well as the class-based improvement policies that are needed. With the knowledge thus gained, they can serve as more capable instructional leaders with insight and foresight (DuFour, 2002; Zepeda, 2013) and identify more accurately teachers who are worthy of promotion to senior posts or selection as role models for colleagues to follow or reflect upon.

At the micro or individual level, teachers can benefit substantially from observation by getting independent advice about their own strengths and weaknesses in the use of strategies and in catering for learning diversity within their classes. They could also decide with greater certainty how far they have achieved their objectives in the lesson (e.g. Good & Brophy, 2008). As suggested by Sullivan and Glanz (2013), the “judicious use of reliable and easy-to-use observation techniques can increase teachers’ awareness of classroom behaviour and thereby become instrumental in improving the quality of the teaching and learning process” (pp. 56-57). Unfortunately, notwithstanding its potentially positive impact on teaching, observation is often taken and seen in recent years by the local educational sector as a process for weeding out “the less capable” from the staff list following the ‘voluntary optimisation of class structure’ initiative introduced by the government to publicly funded schools.

In spite of its perceived merits, lesson observation is often fraught with worries. As Wragg’s (2012: vii) well-known remark that “we often ‘observe’ what we want to see” indicates, the information that is collected is limited in representativeness and coverage since many changes that do crop up during the lesson are rapid and unexpected (Black & Wiliam, 1998) and cannot be fully understood by observers from the outside. Seeing the same teacher or the same class time and again can increase reliability and reduce distortions due to Hawthorne effects. However, this practice may exert extra pressure on teachers and students (Education Bureau, 2008) and lead to concerns about discrimination. It can at best give a few more snapshot views of classrooms (Haynes, Wragg, & Wikely, 2002; O’Leary, 2014) but the reliability of the overall picture is still questionable because pre-observation and/or even observed lessons are likely to degenerate into rehearsals or shows if teachers feel that they ought to impress observers by using more strategies or resources or requiring students to behave differently from normal. The reminder by Waxman (2000) that “teachers have also been known to dramatically alter their instruction (patterns) when observers are present ...” (p. 6) is pertinent in this regard.

Developing a recording sheet for all aspects of behaviour that need assessment is a difficult task for external reviewers and the school management alike because of variations in teacher and student culture across classes and year levels. Reaching agreement between observers and observees on what aspects to look for is often a significant issue although within a school this can often be resolved by staff themselves after considering prevailing teacher and student characteristics. Controversy also revolves around the weight that should be given to different teaching skills such as those for conducting analytical group discussions and those for the comparison of alternative solutions. Further divergence in views may arise because the skills that require observation often vary substantially across subjects (such as helping students learn how to draw a cross-section during a geography lesson and determine the molarity of a solution in a chemistry experiment) and even from one theme to another within the same subject (such as those for facilitating concept learning and the conduct of experiments in the study of gravity and sound in physics lessons). In general, reliable and valid classroom data can only be obtained if observers are working meticulously to minimise the halo effect (i.e. giving recognition to only those teaching and learning strategies they prefer) and if teachers and students are behaving just like what they are used to be.

To most teachers, the fairness of observations is questionable because students' behaviour and learning quality during the lesson are often taken as a direct and leading measure of their professional ability and yet can be easily affected by extraneous variables beyond their control. The anxiety felt by teachers is growing sharply in Hong Kong because of ever-increasing workload (Lai, 2011), rises of staff redundancies as student populations rapidly shrink (Ho, 2009), as well as the widening diversity in ability and motivation levels even within the same class (Forlin & Sin, 2010). Students themselves could feel apathetic, unduly pressured or bothered if they are observed frequently (say, in more than a few periods taught by different teachers within a month) or by senior staff who may not be teaching them or not understanding enough. Their learning outcomes and behaviour may not accurately reflect the value of the effort put into the lesson by their teachers when an observer is present. Moreover, students might not be able to learn subject content in detail or seek for the clarification of concepts which have been taught earlier because of their teacher's urge to cover a pre-determined set of objectives during the observed lesson.

Alternative observation procedures

Given the wide range of shortcomings with conventional procedures, there is a rising need for the use of low-interference alternatives that can lead to the fair and reliable assessments of lessons and enhance the continuous professional development of teachers. Lesson study is one of these widely used options in Japan primarily for the purpose of improving teaching expertise on a collaborative basis, and is becoming popular in

many Western countries (O’Leary, 2014). The arrangement entails that teachers of the same subject and/or a given year level work together to study the curriculum, formulate teaching goals for an agreed topic, plan for the lesson, conduct research, share observation comments and reflect on key issues (e.g. Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006) while one of them teaches in the classroom and others observe and provide feedback. Compared to top-down observations, this approach can be more useful for arousing creativity and the openness of mind amongst colleagues (Lieberman, 2009) besides enhancing their professionalism in helping students learn deeply and broadly during the lesson. As Lee (2008) has reported, it is more capable of helping teachers improve their lesson strategies than conventional approaches.

Teacher rounds, which is a more refined and participation-oriented group approach than lesson study, requires teachers to take up the roles of observers and observees in rotation (Troen et al., 2014). Instead of relying mostly on collaborative work and sharing among a group of teachers, the subject head or another veteran colleague who is conversant with the content knowledge, pedagogy and/or the class concerned serves as the facilitator. He/she can contribute significantly by helping teachers develop and use the skills needed for overcoming complications in the lesson and engage students at various motivation or ability levels in learning tasks to good effect, as well as providing suggestions and comments before and after the lesson. Facilitators in return may gain insights about how lessons can be better analysed and reflect about how teaching and learning in their own classes can be improved. The common problems they may face lie in developing rapport with teachers, catering to teachers’ views and offering insight that is directly relevant to coping with students of different learning styles. A possible way out for them is to observe the classes concerned prior to the lesson during which their suggestions are tried out, and to discuss with teachers afterwards so as to identify areas that need improvement and propose more effective alternatives. Another approach is for teachers to be invited to a lesson taught by the observer and then encouraged to raise their observations during the discussion before setting out to develop viable strategies for the lessons when they are to be observed.

Teachers and students are likely to behave as usual and their performance can be evaluated more accurately if lessons are conducted in ‘unobserved’, naturalistic settings. ‘Unseen’ observation is one of such non-intrusive approaches, and is a variant of teacher rounds with observees working together before and after the lesson while ‘observers’ stay away from the classroom. Teaching is done in the first place according to an action plan based on the consensus between the teacher and the ‘observers’. Follow-up discussion is then conducted and the teacher writes up the action plan for a subsequent lesson based on the feedback from colleagues. ‘Observers’ are therefore supportive colleagues and well-informed guides in the process rather than apathetic, unwitting and fault-finding superiors (e.g. Cogan, 1995). Teachers on the other hand are recognised as not only knowledgeable

about pedagogy and their students but are fully capable of perceptive self-reflection and pursuing professional development on their own (O’Leary, 2014). The procedure is not unlike that of a counsellor listening to a client about significant life events and offering advice according to what is heard (Rinvold, 1988). With advancements in video camera technology, ‘unseen’ observation can be taken a step further by capturing the ‘live’ images of classroom reality and analysing the recordings in depth afterwards (Dyke, Harding, & Liddon, 2008) for a peer training or professional development purpose. Teachers wearing wireless earpiece devices may in fact get instant advice from colleagues who are monitoring the lesson away from the classroom (O’Leary, 2014). At the same time, Hawthorne effects and the time and physical cost incurred by observers in visiting classrooms can be substantially reduced.

Suggestions for implementing effective observation

Compared to conventional sit-in observation methods, participatory and non-intrusive approaches like those discussed above are more capable of capturing lesson realities and fostering teachers’ improvements individually and the development of collaborative learning communities (Ofsted, 2010) by promoting self-reflection, peer discussion and frank dialogue. At the territory-wide level, the Government as the overall authority for the implementation of policies should promote their use and increase the ability of observers in enhancing lesson quality with a high level of effectiveness and efficiency. Education officials should take the initiative in preparing recording forms together with teachers’ representatives and according to the overall consensus about the aspects for consideration and the weight to be attached to each because collective wisdom is a better guarantee of quality and respect for the diversity of views and of greater acceptance by observees. At the local level then, teachers should be given more opportunities in the first place for the identification of students’ learning needs, development of viable proposals, trialling and implementation of teaching methods, monitoring of progress and on-going consultation for seeking improvements. They must be allowed to add their own items because only they are fully aware of students’ strengths and weaknesses in learning their subjects. After every cycle of external review or internal observation, the recording form should be revised according to general classroom conditions and the performance of teachers and students concerned. With local circumstances being considered, it can be amended for use in peer observations as well. Meanwhile, students should be consulted through their representatives about the sections on their behaviour and learning outcomes because as the ‘consumers’ of teaching how far they can benefit from the lesson is often strongly affected by the way and quality of teaching. The form prepared after considering the views of all stakeholders can then be used by reviewers and principals to help teachers improve on a continuous basis.

Borich (2011) had identified eight generic aspects worthy of emphasis when observing classrooms, namely the dimensions of learning climate such as warmth and control, teachers' use of management skills, clarity in giving directions and the use of examples, variety in the use of media, rewards and students' ideas, use of appropriate teaching strategies, ability to engage students in differentiated activities, provision of feedback to extend and enhance learning, and the skills for promoting higher-order thinking and project work. In a similar vein, O'Leary (2014) recognised other good practices that should be looked for, namely a sound knowledge of subject matter and suitable pedagogy, the contextualisation of learning to foster students' assimilation and relating content to the wider world, stimulation of students' engagement, promotion of students' ownership of learning content and approach, catering for learning diversity, the continuous management and monitoring of learning experience, maximisation of learning potential, enhancement of interaction and collaboration, as well as resilience and continuous self-reflection on the part of teachers. Whether one is designing a territory-wide, school-based or subject-specific form for use in observations, it is worth paying attention to these and similar criteria described in the literature. Defining them clearly for use in the lesson is necessary for observers and observees to understand specifically about the kind of teacher and student performance that is desired (e.g. Stuhlman, Hamre, Downer, & Pianta, 2010). Teachers' heavy workload must be taken into account in the design process as well because of its significant impact on their lesson preparation work and choice of teaching methods. Observers for their part should be open-minded and give due consideration to the overall ability levels of the classes as well as teachers' usual patterns of behaviour. Owing to the rapid pace and immediacy of classroom interactions and activities, however, it is not realistic to expect teachers and students to meet all or even most of the criteria in the recording form during any one lesson.

To enhance teachers' professional development, the setting of specific items for observation should be based on the key variables for shaping teaching practices, including the prevalent learning culture in the class, resource and time availability as well as teachers' professional strengths and weaknesses. Lessons taught by novice teachers may be assessed primarily with respect to their mastery of basic pedagogic skills (like questioning techniques) together with their ability to motivate students in achieving desired learning outcomes. When observing veteran teachers in the classroom, observers should consider these aspects as well as the patterns of behaviour that are typical of master teachers. According to the analysis by Bright (2013), the list could include the making of adequate lesson preparation, enthusiasm and effectiveness in the creation of a positive and encouraging learning climate in the classroom as well as the payment of attention to students' learning needs and ability. The basic purpose of assessing veteran teachers on a larger variety of criteria is to encourage the deepening and broadening of professional expertise as their experience in teaching students of different academic ability and motivation levels grows through the years.

When it comes to the development of expertise in lesson observation, contributions from quality assurance officials and educational researchers are crucial. Backed up by their previous teaching experience in schools, knowledge about a wide range of lessons they have visited and their role in policy-making, they should take the lead in developing an observer training programme that can cater for the diversity of situations in a variety of classrooms and schools. Observers should also help in anticipating problems and proposing viable preventive and remedial measures rather than just keeping themselves abreast of the latest classroom reality or asking teachers to trial with their suggestions afterwards. In Hong Kong, well-grounded foresight in these areas is especially important because the education sector often has to compete with others for tight government funding and manpower to improve existing services and provide new ones, such as those for the offer of complementary tuition support after school to students with special educational needs, talents or academic potential. Implementing an exchange programme between education officials and external reviewers on one side and principals and teachers on the other is a useful measure in this regard. Doing so can give both parties much needed direct experience of others' working conditions and help them share their views with substance, understand the rationale and procedures of observation from a wider range of perspectives and find viable measures for achieving the underlying aims. Akin to what doctors and other professionals in administrative positions are doing, successful participation in a continuous development programme and a prescribed period of teaching in classrooms at the front-line should be required of external reviewers because a wealth of up-to-date first-hand working experience with students is essential to the making of evidence-based and 'situated' suggestions for improving teaching quality in the classes they have observed. The chance to teach and reflect about their own lessons at least once in a few years can also help officials develop, with a high degree of efficiency, policies that are more useful for enhancing teaching and learning quality than those currently in use.

Principals as the chief observers in their schools should reflect the needs and nature of teachers and students to the government with high fidelity and seek for the manpower, financial resources and services that can support effective teaching and learning rather than merely following official directives as such. To do this task well and serve as role models for colleagues, they ought to develop themselves continuously in both the theory and practice of lesson observation and school improvement procedures. Adopting a reflective critical supervision approach (Goldhammer, Anderson, & Krajewski, 1993; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013) which enhances collegiate working relationships, mutual trust with teachers as well as a balance with reality is crucial here because of its positive effects on arousing empathy and promoting frank dialogue about how teachers can effectively enhance learning within their classes. Principals should also do more in creating the conditions needed for collaboration and development among teachers in this regard instead of just sharpening their minds and skills for observation during the lesson (e.g. Troen et al., 2014).

Because of their duty in enhancing learning at school and the authority they are holding, principals need to become effective instructional leaders as well (DuFour, 2002) and plan for the on-going improvement of teachers and students under their supervision. Whenever their administrative schedules permit, at least once in a few years they should teach one full class which is preferably the one that is having the highest proportion(s) of less motivated and/or less able students. Equipped with up-to-date understanding of teaching and learning in their schools and teaching experience of their own, they are better placed to evaluate teachers' decisions and behaviour during the lesson. To be fair and really helpful to teachers, at least two experienced and well-trained observers should be present in any single observation. One could attend to teachers' subject knowledge and use of strategies, while the other would concentrate on students' participation and learning processes in general. Teachers meanwhile should continuously reflect on the value of observation and how their practices can be improved according to the peculiarities of their classes.

Teachers by nature are mindful of their professional images and wary of being observed in the presence of students. Feelings of resentment may even flare up amongst those who feel that their professional strengths or personal theories of teaching and learning are not duly recognised by observers. Promoting respect for their pedagogical ability is therefore a crucial way for arousing their acceptance of observation as a positive step for professional development. Because of their discerning knowledge about how students can learn better, they should be free to name the date, time and class for observation and the areas to which more attention is needed. The observation form should allow for the grading of performance on a 4-point scale (say, 'outstanding', 'good', 'satisfactory' and 'needs improvement') as well as the recording of learning activities, students' responses to key questions and how far the teacher has helped them pursue the subject matter further. By taking a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach like this one (O'Leary, 2014), the chance of obtaining a comprehensive and accurate understanding of teaching and learning during the lesson can also be significantly raised.

After the observation period, the completed form should be copied to the teacher for comment and follow-up discussion. Observers should give the overall grade and remarks only after a careful reconsideration of the views which have been raised. If the teacher happens to find them unacceptable, a second observation has to be conducted by two other members of the senior management a few weeks later. Through this appeal and review mechanism, which is similar to that of seeking the opinion of a third reviewer about whether to accept a paper for publication in an academic journal after rejection by one of the first two, the chance that merits or flaws in the lesson have gone unnoticed in the initial observation can be substantially reduced. Teachers can also feel greater respect for their professional autonomy and classroom decisions in the process. After all, collaboration based on equality is essential for building mutual trust between observers and observees

(Education and Manpower Bureau, 2003), and the value of a lesson observation should be measured primarily in terms of its ability to promote the development of teaching expertise and student learning rather than the finding of faults.

Implications for research

Exploration into the effectiveness of conventional observation practices, the alternatives discussed above and other approaches (such as peer coaching and portfolio assessment; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013) and the mode of using them can certainly shed light on how they could be employed optimally for enhancing lesson quality under a variety of conditions. Teacher education institutions and subject organisations could take the lead in this enquiry task because of the substantial research resources and expertise they have. Their contributions alone however may be limited by their insufficient understanding of local school and class conditions. Collaboration between them and school teachers here is beneficial to both as it can help the former to describe and account for trends and patterns more accurately and deeply and the latter to develop well-focussed measures for improving the quality of learning in the classes they teach. Teachers should in fact be encouraged to conduct action research themselves whenever possible because of their more thorough understanding of those aspects of their strategies and students' behaviour that have to be studied and the changes that are manageable and needed. They are also the ones who are going to trial with and implement the new measures in their classrooms in any case.

Teachers may experience difficulties in conducting action research of their own classrooms and maintaining a proper balance between objectivity and engagement, even though this is an important means of their own professional learning (Skinner, 2010). In view of teachers' lack of experience in researching about their own work (Wragg, 2012), they and other investigators can follow a description-correlation-experiment approach instead of a more rigorous hypothesis-testing mode of study. The process can begin with the reporting of teacher and student behaviour in detail, then proceed to look for statistical relationships between such behaviour and relevant variables and finally examine how such variables could affect behaviour and learning outcomes. A quasi-experimental research design has to be used because students within a class or classes cannot be randomly assigned into groups for comparison under controlled conditions due to ethical and practical reasons. Observing a teacher of a class in two periods using different methods and seeing a teacher teaching the same topic in different classes at the same form level are just two of the many possibilities forward.

Questions that are worthy of study about lesson observation are well-known by their diversity and numbers (e.g. Skinner, 2010; Wragg, 2012). Enquiry can start with those which are of more immediate interest to observers (like principals or subject heads) and

observees (classroom teachers) such as the following:

1. What observation approaches (whether conventional or alternative) are more capable of finding out what is going on in the classroom accurately without being distorted by Hawthorne effects?
2. Which of the approaches (c.f. Q.1) are more likely to be accepted by teachers and students?
3. Which of the approaches (according to the answers for Q.1 and Q.2) can generate more thorough information that is useful for the professional development of teachers?
4. How should pre-observation meetings be conducted so that observers and observees can agree about the aspects to emphasize during the lesson?
5. How would observees view the feedback given by the observers?
6. How far would observers' feedback affect teachers' practices and students' learning outcomes in subsequent lessons, and why?

Apart from the above questions, teachers as researchers can also study video records of their own lessons and write about what students have done and why they have taught and managed the lessons in the ways they did. This kind of self-assessment, done perhaps once in a month, can form the basis of a year-long action research study and encourage teachers to develop and use teaching strategies that are better suited to their students as time goes on. If they so wish, they could share their experience here with colleagues individually or collectively in departmental meetings and staff development days as well.

Conclusion

The use of classroom observation to obtain first-hand information for a range of appraisal, development, training and lesson improvement purposes is indispensable because of the need to enhance teaching quality and the growing calls for accountability and transparency from parents, the mass media and the public. In a recent comparison about the implementation of educational innovations amongst twenty more advanced economies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD), 2014), Hong Kong had fared well in ten areas including the frequencies of peer evaluation in primary schools, teacher observations in secondary schools and external teacher evaluation in both groups of schools. With higher levels of innovation than the OECD mean, these records have been positively correlated with “higher (and improving) 8th grade mathematics performance, more equitable learning outcomes across ability levels and more satisfied teachers” (p.

2). Although achievements are found only in some aspects of schooling, they do suggest that observation can bring along substantial positive impact. Professional development programmes should aim at arousing teachers' empathy about the value of observation and helping them teach more effectively whenever they are in the classroom.

Lesson observations are promising innovations for improving teaching quality and learning outcomes. The discussion above however suggests that they are not free from problems. What the administrators of the education system and schools need is to find ways to enlarge the benefits of observation practices and minimise their shortcomings after taking teachers' usual classroom practices and students' behaviour into account. While teachers' overall teaching competence can be improved through school-based experiences, pre-service education and continuous professional development, their classroom practices are less changeable as many studies (Zimmerman, 2006; Heick, 2014) have reported. On-going reflection by teachers about their professional duties and teaching paradigms can help them appreciate the worth of observation and put the suggested measures into practice (e.g. Fullan, 1993). In this connection, principals should create a pro-active environment which is favourable for staff professional development, and give greater autonomy to colleagues in lesson planning, peer observations and follow-up discussions. Observing lessons without intrusion into the classroom is a promising way forward although its effects, effectiveness and efficiency would still require in-depth research in various classroom settings. One possibility for enquiry is to use one conventional approach and one alternative approach with the same class and the same teacher in the first term and the second term respectively. Alternatively, the two approaches may be used in different classes taught and selected by the same teacher in the school year. A third way forward could be to use a conventional approach in a peer observation session in the first term and an alternative approach in the second, or vice versa.

Researchers and teacher education institutions could help to enhance the value of observation by finding which of the conventional or alternative approach(es) is/are more effective in monitoring classroom performance and its/their impact on student learning and the development of teaching expertise. This could be done in various key learning areas and across year levels in view of teacher, student and subject characteristics. Principals should encourage the conduct of such studies before selecting the most suitable approach for use in their schools. Reviews about the effectiveness of the chosen approach and its effects are needed every few years because of changes in classroom reality and curriculum demands with time. In any case, teachers should be free to give details about their classes before the observation lesson and explain their preferred classroom strategies afterwards.

Adopting a collaboration-oriented and research-based paradigm in selecting an effective observation approach is a new experience for principals and teachers. Because of its novelty alone, the approach is already likely to encounter a host of problems

including those which have not been anticipated. However, it can be improved through continuous professional workshops, trialling and in-house reviews in a variety of class and school settings. Imperfections can be rectified if schools and teachers are encouraged to implement it according to local circumstances. After all, and in line with the familiar dictum that “weighing a baby does not make it grow”, observation should be considered as a process of improving teaching and learning through dialogue and collaboration (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013) but not just for teacher appraisal purposes and the evaluation of overall teaching quality in schools. This view is especially valuable for enhancing professionalism, teaching expertise and democratic school management in an educational system where participatory classroom processes are much needed for helping students at widely different levels of ability and motivation to improve their quality of learning. The choice of approach should be based on the prevalent collaboration culture and the building of trust among colleagues, the consensus of the school management and teachers, and teachers’ mastery of student learning needs and their ability to teach effectively in dynamic classroom situations. It is the wish of the author that the perspectives and suggestions in this paper can stimulate discussion and research about improving the quality of lesson observation to the benefit of student learning in schools, both locally and elsewhere.

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香港學校內的課堂觀課——回顧與前瞻

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摘要

對教育當局、校長、老師、研究學者和公眾而言，課堂觀課往往被視為有不同目的。本論文以一個正在進行改革的教育制度為背景，討論了這些不同觀點，觀課的優點與缺失，及它對學生行為、教育的創意性、公平性、可信度和教師觀感等各方面的影響。就着改進觀察者能力的發展與教師的專業能力和態度，本文亦作出一些建議，它對其他方法（例如：課堂研究、「不在場」觀察及視像科技的應用）亦有所分析。進行分析時，作者顧及了對課堂及教師做法的理解，隨後亦討論研究帶來的啟示及觀課者的訓練。總括而言，雖然觀課可以是有用的監察工具，觀課者亦應有靈活性，在選擇做法時需要根據學生特色及它們對促進教師合作、反省和專業發展的能力。

關鍵詞

觀課評核，校外評核，校長作為模範者，促進教學效能，另類觀課方式