A New View of Walk-Throughs
Connie M. Moss and Susan M. Brookhart

Through formative walk-throughs, principals focus on building their understanding of student learning, not on checking off a list of best practices. Kirk Lorigan represents a new breed of principal—one who moves through classrooms and looks at learning experiences through the eyes of students: watching a lesson from the students’ perspective, and encouraging teachers to do the same, brings enormous clarity. It helps me to dialogue with teachers about what works for students, plan for ways to increase student learning and gather evidence together about the effectiveness of our actions by examining what students do to demonstrate their learning in daily lessons.

The five to ten minutes Mr. Lorigan spends in an average of five classrooms per day inform how he leads learners and learning at Kittanning Junior High School in the Armstrong School District in Pennsylvania. Formative walk-throughs are his pathway to stronger leadership, professional learning, and strategic action. The other administrators in the district share his commitment. They also walk through classrooms looking for and learning from what the students are actually doing, saying, writing, or making during the lessons. Principals and assistant principals work as teams, varying their schedules so they can walk through as many classrooms, grades, and subjects as possible. That way, they can compare what they saw and maximize their learning.

Cheryl Soloski, coordinator of curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the district, explains how formative walk-throughs have benefited their leadership teams: We are all looking for the same thing: assessment-capable students. Can students explain what they are supposed to be learning during the lesson? Are they using student look fors [criteria for success] to assess how well they are learning it? Can they tell us about the next steps they will take to improve their understanding during the lesson? Our common focus allows our administrators to have conversations that are richer and action oriented.

These conversations happen informally whenever administrators see one another and formally during monthly meetings where administrators examine their walk-throughs describe the lesson together and share insights. They ask themselves: What did I see? (What evidence of learning did students exhibit during the lesson?); What does it mean? (What is it evidence of?); and What do I need to learn more about? (Where are the gaps in my understanding?).

Formative walk-throughs differ in style and purpose from traditional walk-throughs. Traditional walk-throughs—frequent, short classroom visits that focus on the effects of instruction—are often guided by checklists of strategies that principals look for as they observe teachers and instruction. These prescriptive lists tie principals to a protocol that gathers one-sided evidence, invites misconceptions about effective teaching and meaningful learning, and derailed opportunities for collaborative learning.

Our work with building principals and central-office administrators helps us see the transformative effects of a formative walk-through process. During formative walk-throughs, the principal assumes the role of the leading learner—a role that goes a long way toward forging a culture of collaborative and evidence-based practice.

The Problem with Tradition

Traditional walk-through protocols place value on a discrete list of best practices. In doing so, they perpetuate three education myths.

First, they foster the belief that principals know exactly what to look for, have been trained to critically assess teaching quality, can infer what teachers should do to raise student achievement, and know the right next steps to suggest to teachers. This myth of the principal as “evaluator in chief” implies that only teachers need to continue their professional development and that the principal already possesses deep understanding of teaching and learning. Because of this myth, traditional walk-throughs are rarely seen as learning opportunities for the principal.

Second, traditional walk-throughs suggest the existence of a foolproof recipe of best practices that raise student achievement regardless of the context, the content, or the students in question. Armed with a prescriptive set of one-size-fits-all criteria, the principal focuses on what the teacher is doing, saying, making, or writing (uses a variety of instructional techniques; promotes increased time on task; uses formative assessment strategies; displays evidence of preparation; uses logical, purposeful, and thought-provoking questions) to draw conclusions about what’s going on in the classroom and how it contributes to student learning.

Analyzing just one item from the examples—promoting increased time on task—reveals the holes in this line of thinking. The underlying conventional wisdom goes something like this: More engaged time equals greater learning. But time on task is and of itself doesn’t ensure meaningful learning, nor does it increase student achievement. Students can spend their time diligently completing a surface-level study guide without ever constructing a shred of conceptual understanding. It is not the amount of time students spend on a task; it is the quality of the task that determines the quality of the student learning.

Third, traditional walk-throughs perpetuate the notion that information about student learning flows from the top down. Principals gather data and interpret it for teachers, who then use that interpretation to better instruct the students. Such “trickle-down decision making” ignores the role of the most important decision maker in the school—the student. By looking through a static lens of best practices, the principal can certify whether strategies are in place and promote their use in classrooms without ever determining whether those strategies actually improve student learning.

If the Principal Were a Student

A formative walk-through is an intentional learning process focused on raising the achievement of all learners in the building—the students, the teachers, and the principal. Principals use formative walk-throughs to assess and strengthen their own knowledge and skill, reveal and challenge their assumptions about student learning, and use what they learn to promote future-focused and evidence-based collaborative conversations.

During formative walk-throughs, principals focus on understanding the lesson from the student’s eye view by asking themselves two questions: (1) If I were a student in this classroom, what would I think was important for me to learn today, and how well would I believe that I had to learn it? (2) If I did everything the teacher asked me to do during this lesson, what would I actually learn, and what kind of evidence would I produce that I had learned it? Principals accomplish this
by looking for and describing performances of understanding (Moss & Brookhart, 2012)—what students do, say, make, or write during the lesson that deepens their understanding of important concepts and processes, helps them learn to self-assess, and produces evidence of where they are in relation to mastering the learning target for the lesson.

Because students are the most important decision makers in the school, formative walk-throughs include conversations with students that begin with the question, What are you trying to learn today and how will you know when you’ve learned it? Principals learn that meaningful lessons answer four important questions. Each of these questions corresponds with an element of a formative learning cycle built around learning targets (as explained in Moss & Brookhart, 2012):

1. What is important for me to do in today’s lesson? (Learning target)
2. What must I learn in order to be able to do it? (Lesson-sized chunk of content knowledge and skill)
3. How will I be asked to show that I can do it? (Performance of understanding)
4. How well will I have to do it? (Success criteria or “look for”)

Shauna Braun-Zukowski, coordinator of 9–12 curriculum, assessment, and instruction and federal programs for the Armstrong School District in Pennsylvania, shared a story of a principal observing these four elements during a 2nd grade reading lesson on cause and effect:

The teacher modeled the reasoning involved using a passage from a chapter book. Pretty common stuff, but then the lesson really got good. As part of the explanation of the learning target, the teacher gave the students a “look for” to guide them during their performance of understanding: You will know you (understand) cause and effect well because you will be able to tell why something happened.

The principal not only could see the learning unfold, but also could see the teacher and the students carefully assessing the learning as it was happening.

Everyone could hear the students using the look for, asking why and telling why as they worked on a differentiated lesson. Everyone could see some students using a blank chart to organize causes and effects from their story, some students using charts that were partially filled in, and some students working in a small group with their teacher.

From this observation, the principal learned that even though students were doing different work from one another, they were all checking to see if they could tell why things happened. They were working toward the same target and knew what to do to reach that target and demonstrate that they had done so.

By using formative walk-throughs, principals develop conceptual understandings that give them new eyes, a new voice, and new confidence. During a traditional walk-through, principals don’t describe what they see; they only see what they can describe (Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011). For example, it’s impossible for a principal to recognize that a lesson does not have a performance of understanding if he is unaware of the concept. Nor will a principal be able to differentiate a learning target from a reworded instructional objective if she is not clear on what distinguishes one from the other.

As principals look for and learn from what students do, say, make, or write during a lesson, they develop a keener eye for what learning looks like and an ever-growing understanding of how effective teaching supports the learning process.

Avenues for Conversation

Tracy McNelly, assistant superintendent of secondary education in the Norwin School District in Pennsylvania, describes the benefits of a focus on schoolwide learning:

Just the other day, our secondary English teachers were grappling with ways to design daily learning targets for literature circles. They were trying to wrap their heads around how asking students to do close readings prior to peer discussions should require a specific learning target that is unique for each literature circle.

This is the first time we have ever posed that question.

Formative walk-throughs promote a common language that makes such conversations possible. Each conversation builds on previous learning to create deeper understandings of how students learn and achieve.

Secondary principals gain confidence to talk about lesson design with teachers who are the content experts. As a matter of fact, not understanding the content can help principals look at the lesson from the student’s eye view. Steve Shuttles, principal of West Shamokin High School in the Armstrong School District, shared this insight:

I can’t possibly be an expert in every subject or topic in our high school. When I visit a classroom, I adopt the perspective of students who are also grappling with the content, concepts, or skills for the first time. I no longer watch the mechanics of instruction, I watch for the impact the lesson is having on student understanding. For instance, I can’t speak a word of Spanish, yet every time I observe our Spanish teacher I learn something more about Spanish. I listen, watch, and do everything the teacher asks the students to do. I use the same thinking when I sit in on a lesson and don’t learn anything.

Focusing on Learning

Formative walk-throughs build an atmosphere of trust and support for all learners—the principals, the teachers, and the students. As Susan Miller, assistant to the superintendent in the Laurel School District in western Pennsylvania, noted, “We are not looking for a list of what the teacher can’t or didn’t do. Instead, we are looking for and learning about what the students need and what they will benefit from.” This focus creates a collaborative learning environment for everyone.

References
