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Welsh Government

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Classroom observation – purpose and protocols

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Classroom observation can be an important tool in raising standards through supporting practitioners in sharing and developing their skills and so improving outcomes for learners. While there is no upper limit placed on the number of occasions in which observation may take place it is essential that the emphasis is firmly placed on the quality of experience rather than quantity.

To ensure that observation is purposeful, supportive and developmental, all those involved in arranging, carrying out, or participating in observation should observe the following guidance which sets out the purpose and protocols that characterise effective practice.

What is meant by ‘classroom observation’?

‘Classroom observation’ refers to all occasions when learning and/or teaching activities are observed for a specific purpose by someone other than the class teacher and support staff normally attached to the class.

Principles and protocols

Classroom observation should observe the following principles.

- All those involved in each observation should have a shared understanding of its specific purpose. Disputes about observation procedures, etc., should be dealt with through the school’s established issue resolution processes and/or recognised collective issue resolution processes where applicable.
- Where practicable and appropriate efforts should be made to combine observations for different purposes so that the most efficient use is made of opportunities for classroom observation.
- Careful thought should be given to the choice of observer so it reflects the purpose of the observation.
- Observation should support and develop learning and teaching – there should be minimal disruption to normal classroom activity.
- Observation arrangements should be planned in advance so those involved have adequate notice.
- Observation should be objective, developmental and supportive and conducted with professionalism, integrity and courtesy.
- Successful observation requires preparation and appropriate consideration.
- As part of the school’s overall arrangements for classroom observation those involved in the observation should seek to agree in advance the nature and timing of any feedback to be provided and with whom it is to be shared.
- Planning and feedback arrangements should take account of directed time and statutory terms and conditions of employment.

In addition, for observation involving judgements on the performance of individual practitioners, the following principles should also apply.

- Only a person holding QTS can carry out observation of teaching for the purpose of teachers' performance management (including NQT and GTP assessment) and as part of capability procedures.
- The nature, purpose and amount of observation, as well as the areas to be focussed on should be determined at a planning meeting.
- The scope of teaching observed will need to be well balanced to reflect the range of a teacher's work, but should not be excessive in total.
- It is important that total time of observation is limited to no more than that required to form sound and evidenced judgements as frequent observation sessions are disruptive and counter productive.
- Careful consideration is required at the planning meeting of the timing and number of observation sessions to be carried out during the academic year. This consideration should also include the requirements of the appraiser to adequately prepare, carry out and report back on each session. In order to reduce bureaucracy in schools some appraisers, for example, find it helpful to link each session to natural breaks in the academic year such as terms.
- At least five working days notice should be given of observation for these purposes.
- It is important that the observed sessions should proceed in as normal an atmosphere as possible.
- Constructive oral feedback should always be provided as soon as possible after the observation and confirmed in writing within five working days. Teachers should be given the opportunity to add their own written comments to this feedback.
- All those with access to information gained from the process should respect its confidentiality and ensure that the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998 must be followed at all times.

Purposes of classroom observation

The purposes of observation can be grouped under the following areas (these are not necessarily exhaustive or exclusive).

1. To **observe the learning** of individual learners and/or groups of learners, for example:
 - tracking progress of individuals and/or groups across the curriculum
 - learners' experiences in different settings
 - awareness-raising for governors.
2. As part of **continuing professional development**, for example:
 - sharing effective practice
 - shared learning and collaborative development
 - peer observation
 - as part of coaching and mentoring arrangements
 - specialist guidance or advice – such as on teaching techniques, curriculum areas, use of ICT equipment, etc.

3. To **monitor the quality of teaching**, including:
- as part of the annual performance management cycle as defined in the school's Performance Management Policy
 - as part of capability procedures as defined in the school's Capability Policy
 - as part of the statutory induction process for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) as defined in Welsh Government regulations and guidance
 - as part of the Graduate Teacher Programme (or other teacher entry programmes) as defined in Welsh Government regulations and guidance
 - for the purposes of making judgements about learning and teaching in the school as a whole
 - as part of inspection arrangements.