

Supporting Good Reading Instruction

A Guide for Principals

by

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The observational checklists that follow this paper are an evaluation tool for administrators to use when observing teachers teaching reading. This paper also contains information about conducting preconferences, observations and post conferences. I created the first set of checklists for a graduate class I was taking. The purpose was to provide something to support administrators who have little or no training in reading education as they observe teachers. In order to support the teachers, administrators need support themselves. How can an administrator know if a teacher is doing a good job in teaching reading? Or what type of support they need if they are struggling? Hopefully, these checklists and the information provided about observations will help an administrator support her teachers.

The ironic thing is that the first person to use these checklists was me and the principal at the elementary school where I was assigned. I was the staff development coordinator at a school that had received a Reading Excellence Act (REA) grant. We were required by the grant to have pre and post information documenting teacher behavior. We decided to use these observation checklists. The principal and I used these for the first year of the grant.

I did not use the checklist every time I did an observation, however. I found that they were too limiting. I could check things off but the checks didn't tell the whole story. There was not enough room to write what I saw. The first change I made was to take my lap top into the room and type everything I saw and then fill out a checklist and attach it to the print out of the observation. The second thing I did was change the checklists into a guideline for my observations. I had a lot more room to write but it was a reminder of

some of the things I wanted to include. Because I am a reading specialist, I did not need the characteristics or list of activities for my personal observations.

The last change came after I had worked with our teachers for a year and they had all been to an intensive summer workshop. It was back to a checklist again but this checklist was based on what we had worked out as a team. This was our plan as a school for implementing the literacy curriculum – fluency, word study (phonics), comprehension, and writing. All of the teachers had seen these things modeled. Some had been doing them for part of the previous year.

My principal loved this checklist. She had been to all of the training that our teachers had, and she felt that she knew exactly what she was looking for. It also helped her be able to come back to me and ask specific questions. Our reading resource teacher at the school helped me to refine the checklist; she used it with her observations of teachers in fourth and fifth grade. It helped the teachers as well because they became aware of what they were doing and what they still needed to work on.

The reading resource teacher shared our checklist with her colleagues in the district (other reading resource teachers) and our district's master reading teacher. With the district master reading teacher, the checklist was revised again, to add the read-aloud and writers' workshop sections. This gave us the final version, which is the last set of checklists in Appendix A (at the end of this paper).

This checklist works so well for our school because we created it together. The teachers and I figured out how to make fluency work in the classrooms in small groups. We figured out ways to make word banks manageable. It was very much a group effort. The checklist isn't perfect – I still turn it over and jot notes on the back. Also, there are things that are probably not clear to someone outside of our school. For example, on the

checklist for emergent/ beginning readers, comprehension is only mentioned during read-aloud. Our teachers know that comprehension is also a part of new book introduction and journal writing. Our teachers also know that even though word bank is on that list, concept of word is the focus for emergent readers; they know that late beginning readers don't need word banks any longer. All of this they learned in the summer workshop.

Hopefully, the following checklist and observation information will help other schools and administrators improve their reading programs.

Observations

In order to evaluate a teacher teaching reading, you will go through a five-step process: preplanning, preconference, observation, analysis of data and a post conference. The clinical model used in this book is that described by McNergney and Carrier in their book, *Teacher Development*.

Preplanning:

Before meeting with the teacher, think about what you know about the teacher and the students in the class. If you have access to it, you may want to pull any information you have about the students' reading ability. This may include standardized tests, informal information gathered by the teacher or a narrative description.

You may also want to prepare questions ahead of time. Keep in mind the formula, $B=PET$, or "behavior is a function of the person times the environment times the task." Your questions should get at these different components (McNergney and Carrier, 1981). I have included some sample questions in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Initial evaluation:

1. Tell me about your students. (P)
2. What are your goals/objectives for this lesson? (T)
3. How will you know if you are successful; if the students have mastered the goals? (B)
4. What is your role today? How are you going to teach or facilitate their learning? What if any modifications will you make for special needs children? (E)
5. Do you have any concerns or things you would like me to watch for?
6. Double check the time for the observation and set up a time for the post conference.

Sample questions for later evaluations:

1. What have learned about your students? Let's look at the information. Can you explain it to me? (P)
2. How have your students changed since I observed you last? Have you changed your groups around at all? (P)
3. Are there any students who are not making the progress you would hope for? (P)
4. What are the students doing when they are not meeting with you? (E)
5. How do you have your classroom library arranged? (E)
6. How do you ensure that everyone is reading on an appropriate level when they are not with you? (E)
7. How do you support a student who is weak in fluency? Comprehension, etc.? (T)

As you get more comfortable and familiar with the students, the teacher and the process, you can be less formal. The developmental level and experience of the teacher is also going to play a part in how you plan and carryout your preconference. A novice teacher or one who is essentialistic will probably desire more structure. A reading specialist who is an existentialist will probably desire to direct the course of the observation and data analysis.

The last step of preplanning is to set up a preconference and an observation with the teacher. Allow plenty of time for the first preconference. The preconferences will get

faster as you get to know the students and routines of the classroom. Also, plan to stay for the entire reading block. This will most likely be two hours at the elementary level.

Preconference:

Begin the preconference casually. The purpose is to put the teacher at ease. Take a few minutes to work on your relationship with that teacher.

Once you start, use your questions as a guide not as the “be all and end all” of your interview. You will probably need to probe to get the information you want. In the first evaluation, the most important question is “Tell me about your students.” You want to know what the teacher knows about the children’s reading ability, how she knows it and how she is using that information.

If you have researched the children’s reading ability already and your assessment does not agree with hers, do not assume that either of you is wrong. Seek to understand. For example, if you were looking at standardized tests and she is using informal measures, her information is probably more accurate and detailed. Spelling and reading inventories usually give an independent, an instructional and a frustrational level. A standardized test usually only gives you a frustrational level score. Most standardized measures are also not diagnostic. You cannot look at them to analyze students’ strengths and weaknesses. Informal measures will give you more information.

Do not be surprised if the teacher does not know much about the reading ability of her children. Most teachers are not trained to give or interpret diagnostic reading tests. She may be using information from last year’s teacher, last year’s standardized reading tests, a basal test, or she may be just “guessing.” With the exception of guessing, these other sources of information are not bad, but they are usually not sufficient. Another possibility is that she is trying to use informal measures but does not know how to interpret

them. Teachers often use the quantitative data of these measures without the qualitative analysis. The two need to be used together to get the most information.

What you want to see a teacher doing is collecting and analyzing multiple sources of data to determine the abilities and needs of each child and then using that information to teach. I have attached a list of possible ways to document a student's reading ability in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Possible ways to document a student's reading ability

- Word Recognition in Isolation (WRI)
- Spelling inventories
- Writing samples
- Narrative description
- Early literacy screen
- PALS
- Rapid Automatized Naming test (RAN)
- Bryant's pseudoword test
- Running record
- Informal Reading Inventory (IRI)
- Reading rates
- Basal level tests

If the teacher is masterful at diagnosing her students' needs, then your focus will switch to how she uses that information and how she supports her students to help them develop their reading ability.

Conclude the preconference by deciding what you will be focusing on and how you will be collecting the data. Depending on the teacher, you may tell her what you have decided, work collaboratively to decide, or let her tell you. Also depending on your focus, you may want to ask for a Xeroxed copy of the text the students will be reading from. This will allow you to take a running record on each child and determine his/her words per minute.

Keep in mind that the preconference is not just the guide for the observation but also part of the evaluation.

Observation:

During the observation, you will want to sit where you can hear everything and see the students. Come prepared. If you are going to do a running record or determine their reading rate, you will need to bring a copy of the text, something to write on and with, and a stopwatch. You will also need to have practiced. This is not easy to do. Most students read very quickly and it is hard to catch all their errors. I would recommend you start by just counting errors, not trying to code the type of error. Also, do not try to do both a running record and determine reading rate until you have the hang of it. Do one or the other.

Another way of collecting data is checklists. I have included several in Appendix A. A third way to collect data is to write down everything the teacher and students do. Goldhammer recommends writing down what is said instead of what is done, but I do not find this helpful for evaluating reading instruction. I find a description of what is going on, with conversation included when appropriate, much more meaningful. Be sure to include student names, materials used, description of activities, strategies used by the students and strategies taught by the teacher. Record the time each activity changes. You may want to record the time each reader changes.

I would not recommend doing this type of observation the first time. Get into the classrooms and see how things are arranged, in terms of both space and time. Reading instruction can vary greatly from teacher to teacher and grade to grade. It should, to meet the different needs of the students in that class. Some teachers may have centers. Some may call reading groups in the traditional sense and have the children read *round robin*.

Some may read with each child individually. Some teachers will be eclectic, meeting with groups after they have read silently to discuss the book and meeting with other students one-on-one to give instruction in how to read. What students do when they are not with the teacher will vary even more. You need to get the feel for the classroom routine before you attempt an in-depth observation. After a while, you will be able to do this and take a running record at the same time!

Analysis of Data:

Begin your analysis by reading through the preconference and observation data quickly. Then, reread it again more carefully, looking for patterns and looking for the things the teacher asked you to look for. One way to do it is to list strengths, weaknesses (or areas of concern) and specifically what the teacher asked for.

To prepare for the post conference with the teacher, you will probably need to narrow down the information you collected. To do this, I suggest three things.

First, read back through the observation and pick out the strongest patterns. Then, concentrate on what the teacher asked you to look for or what you decided together would be the focus. Finally, look for a theme in your areas of concern. For instance, if a teacher did not have adequate knowledge of her students' abilities, she may have them grouped poorly. This could result in some students struggling while others are bored. Both of these situations could lead to off-task behavior on the part of the students which takes away from instructional time. It may also lead to poor attitudes towards reading by the students—some children may see reading as a chore with no meaning and some may see it as boring. Neither group will make significant progress.

As you are looking through the observation, you may realize that many of the areas of concern could be due to students being placed in books that were too hard or too easy. Make a list of detailed behavioral observations to share with the teacher. For example:

- Jane cried when her reading group was called
- Jane didn't know where the group was when it was her turn
- Jane's word recognition in context was 70%
- Joe talked to Billy while Jane read
- Joe's word recognition in context was 100%. He read quickly and smoothly
- Joe commented twice that the story was boring, yawned and rolled his eyes

Post Conference:

Post conferences are hard for most people. Both the observer and the observee are usually nervous. There are things you can do to help. It is always best to start with the strengths. People need to hear what they are doing right. Teachers certainly do not get to hear it enough, especially from someone who has actually seen them teach. Another suggestion is to point out your limited knowledge. It is not possible to understand everything in the observation. You may have missed something. Also, you do not know what went on in previous lessons. Hopefully, the teacher will have given you some idea in the preconference but she may not have. You can also acknowledge that your knowledge bases are different. Things that you were taught might be the opposite of what the teacher was taught. Last, try to approach things as "This is what I saw" without judgments attached to them.

In the example I gave above, the observer just reported what she saw. She may not have known that Jane's dog was killed yesterday or the eye doctor dilated her eyes or that Joe practiced the story with his Book Buddy before group...but the teacher could tell her in the post-observation conference. The things she saw may still be concerns but for different reasons.

I do not mean to say that you should not say at some point, "Could this be happening because the students are not reading appropriate level text? Show me how you decided what book was appropriate for these children." Teachers who are novices, who are on probation or essentialists, may need you to provide some possible explanations. Experimentalists may need to work through it collaboratively with you. However, if you start by *telling* them that the problem is that the children are not reading appropriate level text, you might be wrong and you will miss an opportunity to help your teachers grow by thinking through the possibilities with you. You will probably also hinder future dialogues.

The final step in the post conference is deciding what to do next. If you had no concerns and the teacher had no concerns, then you are done.

More than likely, one or both of you is going to have areas of concern or things that you want to explore more deeply. Either way, you should come up with a plan to address those needs. Each person should know what the goal is, what their part in finding the solution is and what the timetable is.

This process can be a great opportunity to support your teachers in their varied needs, learn more about the students in your school, increase your own knowledge of the reading process and build positive relationships with your staff.

Appendix A

Observational Checklists

SET 1

Observational Checklist for Emergent Readers

Description of Emergent Reader:

- Lacks voice-to-print match
- Does not attend to print in books; relies heavily upon pictures
- Pretend reading or attempted memory reading; “talking like a book”
- May recognize name and some environmental print in context (e.g. McDonald’s symbol)

Names of Student(s) in Group:

Place checks beside those who participate.

Beginning Time:

Ending Time:

Materials used:

Fluency Activities:

Time:

___ fingerpoint reading to memorized rhymes, jingles, songs and dictations

___ repeated reading of little books

___ other

Comprehension Activities:

Time:

___ listening to stories

___ story illustrations

___ retelling stories

___ drama/ flannel boards

___ concept sorts

___ other

Writing Activities:

Time:

___ drawing and labeling

___ pretend writing

___ picture captions

___ writing letters

___ other

Alphabet Activities:

Time:

___ picture sorts by letters and sounds

___ alphabet games and activities

___ recognition/matching games

___ oral language play

___ other

Comments:

SET 1

Observational Checklist for Beginning Readers

Description of Beginning Reader:

- Able to track print accurately
- Begins to develop a sight vocabulary
- Attempts to use developing sound knowledge to decode
- Slow labored reading
- Finger points while reading
- Subvocalizes while attempting to read silently

Names of Student(s) in Group:

Place checks beside those who participate.

Beginning Time:

Ending Time:

Materials used:

Fluency Activities:

Time:

___ choral and echo reading

___ taped reading

___ repeated reading of familiar text

___ other

Comprehension Activities:

Time:

___ listening to stories

___ predicting in texts being read

___ concept sorts with word bank words

___ retelling stories

___ other

Writing Activities:

Time:

___ dictated sentences

___ writing for sound

___ picture captions

___ other

Word Study Activities:

Time:

___ sorting by beginning sounds

___ word bank sight words

___ sorting by rhyming family & other short vowel spellings outside of rhyme

___ other

Comments:

SET 1

Observational Checklist for Transitional Readers

Description of Transitional Reader:

- Reads silently
- Fluency has improved in familiar texts
- Read in phrases,
- Stop finger pointing
- Can read with expression

Names of Student(s) in Group:

Place checks beside those who participate.

Beginning Time:

Ending Time:

Materials used:

Fluency Activities:

___ paired readings

___ timed repeated reading

___ poetry reading

Time:

___ readers' theatre

___ expert reading

___ other

Comprehension Activities:

___ Directed Reading Thinking Activities

___ open ended, higher order questions; discussion

___ activities before, during and after reading

Time:

___ graphic organizers

___ c. strategies taught, not just assessed

___ other

Writing Activities:

___ journal writing

___ summaries

Time:

___ character studies

___ other

Word Study Activities:

Time:

___ sorting by long and short vowel spelling patterns

___ ambiguous vowel patterns, r-controlled vowels & complex consonants

Comments:

SET 1

Observational Checklist for Intermediate/Specialized Readers

Description of Intermediate/Specialized Reader:

- Reads fluently and with expression
- Prefers silent reading
- Reads many genres
- Acquire different reading styles for different texts

Names of Student(s) in Group:

Place checks beside those who participate.

Beginning Time:

Ending Time:

Materials used:

Fluency Activities:

___ paired readings

___ timed repeated reading

___ poetry reading

Time:

___ readers' theatre

___ expert reading

___ other

Comprehension Activities:

___ Directed Reading Thinking Activities

___ open ended, higher order questions; discussion

___ activities before, during and after reading

Time:

___ graphic organizers

___ c. strategies taught, not just assessed

___ other

Writing Activities:

___ journal writing

___ summaries

Time:

___ character studies

___ other

Word Study Activities:

Time:

_____ syllable juncture

_____ other

_____ derivational constancy

Comments:

SET 2

Observational Checklist for Emergent/Beginning Readers

Names of Student(s) in Group:

Appropriate Level? Ind Inst

Beginning Time:

Ending Time:

Materials used:

Fluency Activities:

Time:

FLUENCY ACTIVITIES WERE WHAT WE WERE FOCUSING ON AT THE TIME FOR EMERGENT AND BEGINNING READERS. THEREFORE, IT GENERALLY GOT MORE SPACE.

Other Activities (comp, word study, writing):

Time:

Names of Student(s) in Group:

Appropriate Level? Ind Inst

Beginning Time:

Ending Time:

Materials used:

Fluency Activities:

Time:

Other Activities:

Time:

SET 2

Observational Checklist for Instructional Readers

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