



*Sally Saunders compares lesson observation practice between her NSW and UK experiences and concludes we are well ahead...*

Not so long ago, teaching was a private affair which largely took place between one large person (the teacher) and 30 smaller people (the students). In more recent years, the collective doors of classrooms in so-called developed countries have opened and vast declarations have been made about the importance of instructional leadership, instructional rounds, walk throughs and many more.

My year of experience in Yorkshire, in the United Kingdom, left me to conclude that the current practice for lesson observation as described in [NSW's Performance and Development Framework](#) (PDF) is superior to practices built around the Ofsted system of our 'motherland'.

What follows is a comparison written from the perspective of an experienced teacher, who has always been, and remains, enthusiastic about improving her teaching practice and understanding of effective pedagogy. The paper concludes with an outline of a more positive school-based research and observation experience, which, I argue, points towards a foundation for enhanced collegiality and reflection which may be a useful complement for faculties and stages in NSW public schools.

## *Lesson observations in NSW schools*

Every teacher in NSW completes a plan within the PDF and lesson observations are also part of this framework. This plan includes goals that the teacher wants to work towards in the school year. The goals are negotiated between the teacher and their supervisor. Within this plan, teachers are also required to have two lesson observations. The lesson observations are negotiated between the teacher and the supervisor. The teacher can choose whom they wish to observe them, when and for what purpose.

The goal of this lesson observation is to engage teachers in professional learning and help the teacher with a specific aspect of their teaching. Feedback occurs soon after the observation. The type of feedback that occurs is again up to the supervisor and the teacher. In this way, a safe environment is created. This process provides many opportunities for a teacher to improve their teaching practice and develop leadership capabilities.

## *My UK experience*

In the UK, lesson observations were used to appraise teachers and ensure that they were meeting the required teacher standards. There were five 'walk ins' a year. In my experience, teachers were unaware of when a 'walk in' would occur, although were aware of the week they occur in. The 'walk-in' was completed by an executive member of the school or a member of the faculty. If there was a meeting



after the 'walk-in', that was because there was an aspect of the lesson that the executive member felt needed improvement. If not, teachers were to assume that everything was fine.

There was also one formal observation. In this observation, a member of your faculty and an executive member observed your lesson with a class of their choosing. The teacher must submit an elaborate lesson plan that details the lesson procedures, outcomes for the lesson and the differing needs of all the students in the class and how they will support those students and their needs. You are told that you should not do anything that you would not normally do. However, you are also told to make sure you have several things prepared. Soon after the lesson the team give you feedback. In this feedback you are given a report that shows you have or have not met the teacher standards for the lesson and you are also given three goals to work on for next time.

My response to the UK procedure was mostly fear and worry.

I felt quite anxious throughout the entire process, and this was common amongst other teachers in my faculty. I was told I had to meet all the teacher standards otherwise I would have to be observed again. I enjoyed the feedback component as it is not very common that someone praises you on your classroom practice and found their feedback quite helpful. However, the sense that you are being 'checked on' created a negative atmosphere and put everyone on edge for the week that the observations were taking place.

Further, teacher observations were linked to salary progression, books were checked within the classroom to make sure that the teacher was marking books to the school standard and assessment marking was also checked. It felt that there was little trust between the executive and their teachers. As a result, you spent a large amount of time preparing for the observations, ensuring that everything was accurate and that nothing could go wrong, as opposed to developing challenging lessons or trying new strategies.

Whilst conducting my research, I discovered that both main UK teacher unions (there are a few), the NEU and NASUWT, both provided information about specific myths about the processes that Ofsted go through when evaluating schools in an attempt to prevent some of the unnecessary burdens experienced by teachers. However, regardless of the advice from the unions, schools continued to have more observations than were required, excessive marking of books was required, and assessments were frequently checked by the executive.

## *Action research project*

A positive and very different experience of lesson observations for me in the UK was my involvement in an **action research project**. Here, the topic of research was decided by the faculty (for example, whilst I was there we were looking at teaching writing explicitly) and involved members of the faculty conducting research on different teaching strategies and then sharing that with the group. In the next process, teachers observed each other teaching these new strategies and provide feedback to the group about the observation and how the students responded. In this observation process, the focus was on



developing new teacher strategies and, as a result, there was no anxiety around the observation as the goal was not to check on the teacher but to learn from the teacher, and to develop new teaching strategies, therefore developing leadership.

## Conclusions

My experience found that lesson observations should only be used to develop teacher practice, not to ‘check-up’ on teachers. For me, conducting lesson observations to appraise teachers did not develop quality teachers or leaders. However, using lesson observations as NSW does, within the Performance and Development Framework and within the research project I described, would likely develop quality teachers that are confident within their teaching, but also feel confident to ask their leaders for advice and help.

## References:

NSW Teachers Federation, <https://www.nswtf.org.au/performance-development-framework.html>  
NASUWT Classroom Observation Protocol  
<https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/ac0a7235-fd25-4b8a-9959068b9c65f454.pdf>  
National Education Union: Appraisal and Classroom Observation,  
<https://www.teachers.org.uk/edufacts/appraisal>

*Sally is a History and Drama teacher in the Illawarra. In June 2017, she was on a teacher exchange to Yorkshire, England for twelve months. During this time she was immersed in the English teaching system and upon return from her exchange, Sally brought back with her a new perspective on classroom observation practices.*