

# could do better!



Lesson observation doesn't have to cause resentment, explains Kevin Harcombe, and it is vital for improving teaching and learning...

**J**udge not, and ye shall not be judged!" Clearly, St. Matthew wrote that in pre-Ofsted times. Long gone are the days when teachers closed the classroom door – and, in some cases, bolted and nailed planks across it – and got on with teaching without let or hindrance. And this is a good thing! Feedback on how you teach is an essential part of your professional development and,

handled well, is one of the most rewarding things colleagues can do for each other. Sometimes you'll be equipped with the dreaded clipboard and pro forma (scythes and grim reaper cowl optional), other times you'll just be looking as an objective/critical friend. Either way, observation and feedback from a supportive colleague is a must for continued improvements in teaching and learning.

## WHAT YOU OBSERVE

The children are gathered on the carpet for an introduction to a phonics lesson. The teacher presents the activity with expression and enthusiasm and nearly all the children are engaged, but one is looking round the room and playing with his shoes. The children are shown flash cards with the consonant blends on and have to repeat the sound with the associated action. All children respond bar the shoe fiddler who has recruited another child to play with his Velcro straps. The session lasts 25 minutes and, talking to the children afterwards, many were able to recall and repeat the blends – but had lost all feeling in their bottoms.

that was only a partial disaster," is not the tone we're aiming for here. An Ofsted inspector once said to me following an observation, "Oh my God, what are you going to do about so-and-so?!" Not helpful. Where there is disagreement, always refer back to the school's teaching and learning policies and itemize how the lesson fell short.

If teacher shares your judgement, you are on solid ground. In either scenario it is useful to trace the timeline of the lesson, detailing what happened when and how final outcomes were influenced by what the teacher said, did, or did not say or do, emphasizing in particular what worked well. In this case the teacher's animated and expressive presentation was a real plus and showed great promise for future development. At 25 minutes the session was at least five minutes too long and, though you might have been feeling as disengaged as shoe boy, you need to ensure you offer constructive advice. The teacher might be advised on maintaining clear sight lines in the room so shoe boy is spotted and brought back into the fold. Some strategies to help keep children interested and on task will be needed. A countdown timer on the interactive whiteboard would help keep the lesson on track and the children could be involved in cramming as much learning into the session as possible – the true meaning of "pace". Clear messages about how you will focus on pace and engaging all children in your next observation need to be given in summary at the end of your feedback. You might be feeling slightly depressed after this lesson, but remember you are helping the teacher to improve things for the children.

## Lesson 1

### WHAT YOU FEED BACK

Where a lesson is unsatisfactory or, like this one, just satisfactory it can help to open with, "How do you think it went?" If the teacher thinks it was quite possibly the best lesson ever, you have a challenge. You need to explain clearly and unambiguously why it wasn't - but remember, this is not *The X Factor* and you are not Simon Cowell. Always avoid sarcasm – "Well done,

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## WHAT YOU OBSERVE

A rapid fire mental maths starter leads smoothly into group work on division based on real life word problems. These are set out in well differentiated worksheets. The CA works with the lower ability group whilst the teacher moves between the other three groups. The middle group work quite slowly, spending a lot of time gathering and choosing resources. Children complete the work well and in a reasonable time.

## Lesson 2

### WHAT YOU FEED BACK

This was a good, workaday lesson well matched to the ability of the groups and you will congratulate the teacher on having adopted the suggestions from your last feedback. Never forget to say "Well done!" Teachers always feel apprehensive about being observed and taking care to congratulate them at the outset can relieve a lot of tension. The teacher demonstrated good subject knowledge and the children were all on task, albeit the middle group took some time to settle. You might ask the teacher how this lesson would be followed up. You could also suggest that the teacher sometimes works with the lower ability group and assign the CA to one of the middle groups to keep them focused. The top group need stretching but also need to develop independence in some sessions. Real life problems could be enhanced by drama or role play – setting up a shop or factory in the classroom and getting the children to devise their own division scenarios. Maybe restrict worksheets to one or, at most, two groups and ensure that, though you offer choice in resources, the choice is not so open that the children spend all their time choosing and none on the task. You should be feeling more upbeat after this lesson, which is good, but remember you are striving for outstanding provision for the children and make sure your support leads to further improvement in subsequent observations.

## Feedback principles

Feedback needs to be timely, considered and clear. It should take place away from the classroom on the same day the lesson was observed but not necessarily immediately following. (Some judgements will be refined as you consider what you have just seen and reflect on it.) Feedback always needs to relate to the agreed focus of the observation. Whether the lesson was good, bad or indifferent you need to be clear about the development points the teacher needs to work on, recapping at the end of the feedback and noting them for follow up on subsequent observations. Feedback is not easy and it can be a weight on your shoulders. Try always to separate the personal from the professional: someone can be a lovely person but a lousy teacher. That's a hard message to give, but the children should be your first priority.



# Raise your game

## FIVE LESSONS THAT WILL IMPRESS ANY OBSERVERS...

**1** In the playground one teacher demonstrated to three classes at once (90 children in total) how rivers are formed - using a watering can and a mound of stones, sand and soil. This lead lesson was clear, quick and graphic. Children were captivated and learned all the key points - because they were made memorable.

**2** A treasure chest "from the bottom of the sea" was hauled into class by the teacher. She peeled off the seaweed and opened it carefully. Inside were a silver comb, a string of pearls, a bracelet and other jewellery. The children were then guided through a wonderful writing/storytelling session about how the chest was discovered and who the owner might be.

**3** The children had "done" basic area of regular shapes and were set the challenge of finding the surface area of irregular shapes, including their skin using (several) toilet rolls to mummify hapless volunteers. Great fun in applied maths.

**4** Boxes of electrical circuitry were placed on group tables with the instruction "show the class all you know about electricity". Children had to feed back to each other - a revision/learning experience for everyone - and the teacher then knew where the gaps in their knowledge were and could plan a revision programme.

**5** After reading the story of The Gingerbread Man and acting it out, children made their own and inevitably, whilst they were cooling, one ran away! Their task was to find him using written clues left by the animals the GB had encountered in the story. A great reading and problem solving session.



### WHAT YOU OBSERVE

The children enter the classroom to see a huge, flamboyantly-coloured (papier mache) egg in the centre of the room. Nearby is a note - "Please look after my egg. Yours, The Dragon". It immediately becomes the centre of attention and the children point, talk wide-eyed and tentatively touch it. Articulate discussions then take place about why the dragon left it here, where the dragon might be now and how they might look after the egg in order for it to hatch into a baby dragon. Some children research eggs on the internet. They weigh and measure the egg.

The children are fired up (no pun intended) to write on a variety of aspects as above and read their efforts to their classmates. Two days later the children arrive to find the egg hatched and a thank you note from the dragon.

## Lesson 3

### WHAT YOU FEED BACK

When a lesson is outstanding feedback is a joy to give but still needs to be considered, timely and clear. Every single aspect needs to be praised - the preparation, the presentation, how the teacher kept on the sidelines and enabled the children to do most of the talking and thinking, how all the talk was excellent preparation for some thoughtful and articulate writing as well as cross curricular links. After seeing

this lesson you probably skipped down the corridor, leapt in the air to click your heels and punched the air with a loud "Yes!" Great teachers will still say, "How could I make it better?" Sometimes you simply can't. Lessons like this one need to be celebrated and shared throughout the school and beyond.