

The Effect of Demographics on the Implementation of the Principal Walkthrough

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Abstract

The purpose of this quantitative study was to research how school and principal demographics influence a principal's implementation of the walkthrough process. Principals from New Jersey were administered a survey to provide insight into how they implement the walkthrough process in their schools. The findings suggest that socioeconomic status and level of principal experience have no influence on how walkthroughs are implemented; however, the findings also suggest that level of principal experience does have an impact on whether or not principals share the results of walkthroughs with teachers.

Key Words

principal, instructional leadership, principal walkthrough, district factor group, principal experience, feedback.

An integral part of being an instructional leader is the ability to prioritize the time in classrooms focusing on instruction (Finkel, 2012).

This idea of being visible and among one's staff members originated in the corporate world with William Hewlett and David Packard in the 1970s when they started a practice called management by wandering around (MBWA) in their company, Hewlett-Packard.

The goal of MBWA was to have company leaders go out into the workplace and talk to employees, work with them, ask questions, and help support them if needed (Frase & Hertzal, 1990).

They advanced the idea that leaders should be spending at least 50% of their time in the field working with others (Frase & Hertzal, 1990). Through MBWA, leaders are supposed to walk among the employees with a purpose, to communicate, build morale, empower others and support the organization in its goal of achieving excellence (Frase & Hertzal, 1990). Frase and Hertzal later took the concept of MBWA and applied it to school leadership. The idea of school walkthroughs thus began as a possible educational practice.

Walkthroughs are brief, frequent, unannounced classroom visits that are focused on gathering data regarding the educational practices in the classroom (Kachur, Stout & Edwards, 2010).

While the purpose of conducting a walkthrough may differ from visit to visit, the school leader has the opportunity to gather information from the walkthrough on various areas that may include instructional strategies, implementation of curriculum and standards, lesson objectives, student learning, level of

student engagement, classroom resources, and level of cognitive demand (Kachur et al., 2010).

These short classroom visits are a means of collecting evidence from the classroom to assess and guide school-improvement efforts (David, 2008). Although there are numerous variations in how walkthroughs are utilized, the basic idea of a walkthrough is that it is a short, focused, informal, non-evaluative classroom observation by the principal with the end goal of improving student achievement (Kachur et al., 2010).

Principals may utilize walkthroughs as a means of entering classrooms and gathering data, but many instructional leaders take different paths in their effort to improve student achievement. It is in these different paths that principals may choose different focuses or purposes for visiting classrooms.

Ginsberg and Murphy (2002) cite the following reasons for a school leader to conduct a walkthrough: assessing the school climate, becoming familiar with teacher instructional practices, becoming familiar with the curriculum, assessing the level of student engagement, gathering data on student achievement and student motivation, and establishing themselves as instructional leaders of the school.

Downey et al. (2004) identify additional reasons for conducting a walkthrough. They conclude that a school leader should conduct walkthroughs to identify areas of need for professional development, assess how staff development is impacting teaching, support teacher instruction, assess school operations, and increase the leader's own professional practice as an observer and instructional coach for teachers.

Kachur, Stout and Edwards (2010) identified the following as areas that walkthroughs can improve: “teacher instructional practices, implementation of curricular initiatives, assessment techniques, student behavior, student learning activities, classroom environment and classroom management” (Kachur et al., 2010). The variation in the purposes of walkthroughs is not the only area of ambiguity.

The form a walkthrough takes in regards to frequency and length also varies from principal to principal. Due to such a wide variability between the form and purpose of walkthroughs, it is important to investigate how principals utilize walkthroughs in their respective school settings.

One problem when comparing how different schools implement the walkthrough process is that there is no consistent approach on how best to utilize a walkthrough to improve instructional practice.

Schools differ in regards to the form and purpose of a walkthrough or class visit. In addition, when comparing different schools, what might be impactful for one school may not work for another (Lemons & Helsing, 2009).

While most instructional leaders utilize walkthroughs to improve student achievement, there is no agreed-upon focus to achieve this end. This problem may be addressed by researching the different forms a walkthrough can take and looking at the different purposes principals have for conducting walkthroughs.

While there is a lack of consistency in the form and purpose of walkthroughs, this analysis will look at whether the perceived variability becomes more consistent when we

compare schools with similar school and principal demographics.

Research Questions and Design

This study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1:

Is there a significant relationship between a school’s socioeconomic status and a principal’s purpose for conducting a walkthrough?

Research Question 2:

Is there a significant relationship between the level of administrative experience of a principal and that principal’s purpose for conducting a walkthrough?

Research Question 3:

Is there a significant relationship between the level of administrative experience of a principal and whether or not that principal shares the results of walkthroughs with teachers?

Data were collected using a voluntary survey through an online survey website. The survey was limited to New Jersey public-school principals. One limitation in utilizing this instrument is the assumption that all principals surveyed would answer honestly and accurately. Another limitation in regards to the survey instrument is the assumption that all principals surveyed would have common definitions for the walkthrough terms utilized in the survey.

The design of the study was limited to surveying only principals and their views on the walkthrough process. The study did not survey other building-level or district-level

leaders who utilize walkthroughs as an aspect of their jobs.

The rationale behind limiting the study to school-based principals is to isolate how principals view the purpose of walkthroughs in their respective schools.

A district-level leader may have a different focus or methodology when it comes to conducting a walkthrough, especially since their purpose may be different from that of a building-level principal. The study was limited to the walkthrough process and did not include formal classroom observations utilized for the purpose of evaluation.

Walkthroughs Literature Review

For the purpose of this study, school leaders are implementing the walkthrough process to initiate change in the areas of teaching and learning. There is a clear distinction between when a school leader walks into a classroom to conduct a formal evaluation compared to an informal walkthrough. Formal evaluations inherently bring with them anxiety for teachers. Walkthroughs, on the other hand, are intended to support teachers, not evaluate them.

Walkthroughs are brief, frequent, unannounced classroom visits that are focused on gathering data regarding educational practices in the classroom (Kachur, Stout & Edwards, 2010). A walkthrough is not intended to merely make the school leader visible in the classroom, but rather is an opportunity for feedback and further discussion regarding teacher practices and student learning (Kachur, Stout & Edwards, 2010).

During the era when principals acted as building managers, an administrator's reason for visiting a teacher's classroom was either to conduct a formal teacher evaluation or to inspect the classroom structures and the proper

implementation of curriculum (Cudeiro & Nelsen, 2009). Walkthroughs have attempted to shift the purpose of classroom visits from evaluating teachers to supporting teachers in their instruction of students (Skretta, 2007).

While the purpose of conducting a walkthrough may differ from visit to visit, the school leader has the opportunity to gather information from the walkthrough that includes instructional strategies, implementation of curriculum and standards, lesson objectives, assessments of student learning, level of student engagement, classroom resources, and the level of cognitive demand (Kachur, Stout & Edwards, 2010). These short classroom visits are a means of collecting evidence from the classroom to assess school-improvement efforts (David, 2008), which may take the form of staff professional development.

There are many benefits to making visiting classrooms a common practice. From an instructional standpoint, the more time principals spend in classrooms, the more informed they are in regards to the quality of teaching and level of learning that are taking place in their school. These frequent visits will help principals target which teachers may be in need of additional support to improve their teacher practice (Downey & Frase, 2001).

Walkthroughs allow principals to assess the impact of professional development in the classroom and to assess new educational initiatives (Downey & Frase, 2001). Administrators are able to determine if teachers are actually implementing what they have learned from the professional development that has been offered through the school or district. This information can guide further professional development and approaches moving forward.

If teachers are being asked to implement a new educational program or

initiative, walkthroughs are an opportunity to determine if teachers need further support in implementing the program successfully.

Spending more time in classrooms also has two other valuable functions: it decreases the level of teacher anxiety when teachers see their principal enter their classrooms and provides a more accurate account of teacher practice (Downey & Frase, 2001). Teachers and students will come to expect classroom visits and they will become part of the norm.

The principal's presence in the classroom will not influence what is going on in the classroom and will result in a more accurate account of what typically is occurring in the classroom when the principal is not conducting a classroom visit. If a principal is present in a teacher's classroom on a regular basis, the teacher may be more open to feedback from the principal or more likely to engage with them in a conversation about their teacher practice.

By engaging in the walkthrough process, teachers will be receiving feedback from the frequent visits to the classroom. This practice will support a principal in their observations and post-observation discussions because, having been a frequent visitor to a teacher's room, they will be able to provide a more accurate and valid assessment of the teacher's professional practice (Downey & Frase, 2001).

Impact of Walkthroughs on Student Achievement

Grissom, Loeb and Master (2013) conducted a study of 120 school principals in the Miami-Dade County Public School system, which consisted of observers shadowing each principal for an entire school day. A protocol was utilized that listed 50 different tasks that were to be coded based on the principals'

actions. The data set was then linked to student performance data and principal interviews. The findings indicated that principals spend an average of 12.7% of their time on instruction-related activities, 5.4% of their time conducting walkthroughs, 2.1% of their time developing the educational program, 1.8% of their time conducting evaluations and 0.5% of their time coaching teachers (Grissom et al., 2013).

The researchers found that principals' time spent on instruction did not predict student achievement growth on state assessments (Grissom et al., 2013). The study did, however, find that specific instruction functions did predict student achievement growth, namely, time spent on coaching, evaluation and developing the educational program of the school (Grissom et al., 2013). The act of visiting classrooms alone is not enough to initiate school improvement: The true impact on teaching and learning lies in what comes after the data have been gathered from the walkthrough and the actual coaching of teachers begins.

It is important to note that principals in this study spent such a small proportion of their time devoted to coaching and evaluating teachers (only 2.3%), and yet this study proved the importance of these tasks as they relate to student achievement growth. There is a disparity between the amount of time spent conducting walkthroughs and the time spent coaching teachers. The question remains: Are principals conducting walkthroughs for compliance reasons or actually as a means of supporting teacher practice?

Impact of Walkthroughs on Teacher Self-efficacy

The idea of self-efficacy focuses on one's confidence in their ability to perform at a given level (Bandura, 1994). Confidence in one's professional practice impacts how people feel,

think, and how they motivate themselves (Bandura, 1994). The notion of self-efficacy has been shown to have an impact on student achievement directly as well as how teachers feel about their work in the classroom (Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

Teachers who have high self-efficacy believe in their ability to teach students at a high level, and this helps to promote student learning (Downey, 2004). Self-efficacy has been shown to impact teachers' beliefs in how they perform in the classroom, but research has also shown that it positively impacts student achievement in both reading and writing (Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2000). Frequent classroom walkthroughs have been shown to have an impact on teacher self-efficacy (Chester & Beaudin, 1996). While they do not influence student learning directly, classroom visits have the ability to increase a teacher's belief that they can perform their role effectively.

The mere practice of visiting classrooms has an impact on teacher self-efficacy and building a teacher's ability to face challenges (Bandura, 1994). Teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy create challenging goals for themselves and have the confidence they can control difficult situations and recover quickly if they do not succeed at first (Bandura, 1994). It is this ability to persevere and keep striving to support student learning that makes students perform well in classrooms.

Walkthroughs play a more important role than merely gathering data about teacher practice; they also play a role in shaping school culture and positively impacting the climate so it is conducive for teaching and learning (Ing, 2010; Ziegler, 2006).

Impact of Walkthroughs on Teacher Practice

Walkthroughs and class visits have become requirements for school leaders in most schools. However, not all principals have the training or professional capacity to provide the level of feedback to teachers needed to improve teacher practice (Cudeiro & Nelsen, 2009). Some principals who do not have the expertise to know what to look for in classrooms allocate their time to other areas where they feel more comfortable (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002).

When a principal conducts a walkthrough, they can gather plenty of data, but without having a level of expertise in teaching and learning, this data may be worthless to them (Deboer & Hinojosa, 2012). Principals conduct evaluations and walkthroughs to determine if teachers are doing the right things in their classes, but there is very little support for principals to determine if what they are doing with this information will actually lead to school improvement (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007).

In many schools, professional development is allocated only to teachers for improving their professional practice. By ignoring the professional development of school leaders, we are missing an opportunity to strengthen administrators' capacities to improve instruction (Spanneut, Tobin & Ayers, 2012).

The purpose of conducting walkthroughs and visiting classrooms is to support teacher practice, but spending more time in classrooms also expands the bank of instructional strategies that administrators have at their disposal. The more time administrators spend in classrooms, the more experience they have to share some of these strategies and

techniques with other teachers moving forward (Downey & Frase, 2001). There is an expectation that administrators learn to do the work by doing the work (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2009), but there is a need to ensure that the work they are doing is the right work.

While walkthroughs have numerous benefits—from improving school culture to raising a teacher’s self-efficacy—the main goal for all administrators when walking into a classroom is improving teacher practice.

All school stakeholders understand that high-quality teaching results in higher levels of student achievement (Downey, 2004). School leaders utilize teacher walkthroughs as a means of ensuring that all teachers know what high-quality instruction looks like and how to make the improvements needed to reach this level in their professional practice.

The more a school leader visits classrooms and focuses on curriculum and instruction during these visits, the more positive the impact on classroom instruction (Teddlie, Kirby & Stringfield, 1989).

Walkthrough Models

The numerous walkthrough models differ in their approaches to visiting classrooms. The time spent in the room typically varies, but nearly all models agree that the visit should be short in duration. While in the classroom, each model focuses on different “look-fors” when gathering evidence. The major difference in the walkthrough approaches is in how the feedback is delivered to the staff.

Some walkthrough models focus on individual feedback and coaching, while others focus on providing a school with trends across the entire school or multiple classrooms without providing feedback to specific teachers

regarding their instructional practices. The school leader’s purpose for visiting the classroom determines the method by which feedback is delivered.

If the purpose is to support teacher practice and coach individual teachers, then providing individual feedback and engaging in reflective conversations would be the most beneficial method for all parties involved.

If the school leader is using a walkthrough to assess the implementation of professional development or to determine how a curriculum initiative is being implemented in the school, then a general overview of the trends from a school-wide walkthrough would be the best method.

Regardless of the method used, the value of a walkthrough model should not be based on what is observed, but rather on how the model addresses what the school leader does with this information once it has been gathered (Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013).

Downey Walkthrough Model

The Downey walkthrough model created by Carolyn Downey, who worked as a school administrator during the 1960s, is an approach to visiting classrooms consisting of five basic factors that aims to encourage principals and teachers to work together in a collaborative and reflective manner (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase & Poston, Jr., 2004).

Downey’s approach to walkthroughs consists of short but focused classroom visits that do not exceed three minutes in length. The goal of the walkthrough is to collect a small amount of data that might be used to support a conversation about teacher practice. The walkthrough participants consist of principals, coaches, mentors and/or teachers.

The Downey model focuses on five “look-fors” during the classroom visit: (1) student orientation to work, (2) curricular decisions, (3) instructional decisions, (4) walk the walls and (5) health and safety conditions (Downey, 2004). The feedback is provided directly to the teacher through the use of reflective questions and subsequent conversations.

The goal of these conversations is to improve the choices teachers make as they teach future lessons independent of the principal (Downey, 2004). Downey’s model hopes to create teachers who are self-reflective and have the ability to analyze their own teaching and make future modifications and improvements to their lessons on their own (Downey, 2004).

Design and Methods

This study is descriptive in nature and utilized a survey designed to gather walkthrough and demographic data from school principals. The goal of the study was to use a quantitative design to investigate the relationship between a principal’s implementation of the walkthrough process and the demographics of both the school and the principal conducting the walkthrough.

The study utilized a survey design to compare a relatively large sample of New Jersey school principals. This research design utilized data gathered from web-based surveys that were previously distributed through e-mail to New Jersey school principals as part of a study request from the Seton Hall University Superintendent Study Council in March of 2015. Survey collection was administered by the website Survey Monkey.

The survey was cross-sectional and measured principal perceptions of the walkthrough process from different schools

across the state of New Jersey. A survey was selected to answer the study’s research questions because it enabled the researcher to determine how principals implement the walkthrough process across a high number of schools.

Population and Sample

While school administrators can be district- or school-based leaders, the primary focus of this study is the school principal. Principals are the primary instructional leaders of schools and the ones who frequent teacher classrooms the most.

The sample for this study consisted of 214 New Jersey principals across all socio-economic groupings. The rationale for including New Jersey principals across all socio-economic groupings is that it provides a more complete picture of the walkthrough-implementation process across all socioeconomic levels in New Jersey schools.

Principals were examined from the elementary, middle and high-school levels. By including all levels of schools in New Jersey, the study investigated whether there are any differences in how the walkthrough process is implemented across school levels. The principals were from schools that have populations ranging from less than 500 students to over 3000 students.

The study chose to include all sizes of school districts in order to ensure a high response rate by not limiting the study to a particular district size. The sample of principals included principals who have differing levels of experience, from principals in their first or second year to those who have 10 or more years of experience as a principal. By including principals across experience levels, the study was able to see how the role of instructional leadership changes for those who have been in the role for longer periods of time

as compared to those who are newly appointed principals.

Instrumentation

In this study, the analysis compared each principal's survey responses regarding their implementation of the walkthrough process in their school to demographic characteristics of both the principal and the school setting where the principal conducts the walkthrough. The survey consisted of six prompts pertaining to demographics and 10 prompts pertaining to the walkthrough process.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated from each of the 18 survey questions. The descriptive statistics collected from the survey were summarized and analyzed based on the six demographic variables: (1) district factor group category, (2) district size, (3) grade levels served, (4) principal ethnicity, (5) principal gender and (6) principal experience level.

The demographic data were analyzed using a cross-tabulation analysis to determine if each demographic variable had a statistically significant association with the school principal walkthrough survey responses.

The cross-tabulation analysis included the following walkthrough survey responses: (1) purpose for conducting the walkthrough, (2) most frequent use of the walkthrough, (3) most important use of the walkthrough, (4) length of a typical walkthrough and (5) frequency of walkthroughs.

Cross-tabulation analysis was used as the form of statistical analysis because the survey produced ordinal, nominal and categorical responses. Missing data were addressed through a case-wise deletion

approach in order to maximize the amount of respondents included in each statistical analysis.

A chi-square test for independence was used to assess the degree of association between categorical variables, and Cramer's V was used to determine the strength of the relationship between variables in order to answer the study's research questions.

Findings

Research Question 1: Is there a significant relationship between a school's socioeconomic status and a principal's purpose for conducting a walkthrough? Principals selected one of eight district factor groups in defining their school's socioeconomic status and responded to a survey question asking them to identify the most important purpose for conducting a walkthrough in their school.

There were seven purposes listed in the survey, including to evaluate teacher instructional delivery, to gather data for decision making, to monitor student behavior, to evaluate principal's performance, to evaluate classroom climate, to assess adherence to district policies and other purposes not listed.

There was no statistically significant association between the district factor group and most important purpose for conducting a walkthrough. The Pearson chi-square results indicated that the assumptions were not met, and the reported chi-square test resulted in a non-significant result ($X^2=39.335$, $df=35$, $N=167$, $p=.282$).

These findings suggest that principals are not more likely to select a specific walkthrough purpose as the most important based on the district factor group or socioeconomic status of the school community.

Despite the lack of a statistical association between district factor group and the purpose for conducting a walkthrough, it is important to note this study determined that regardless of the socioeconomic makeup of their schools, principals prioritize walkthroughs as an opportunity to evaluate teacher instructional delivery, evaluate classroom climate and to gather data for decision making.

Most principals, regardless of their district factor group, believe walkthroughs are to be used to evaluate teachers in some form. Despite research indicating that walkthroughs are meant to be informal and non-evaluative (Downey, et al., 2004), the principals in this study have indicated that they use walkthroughs as an additional means to evaluate teachers.

When walkthroughs are used primarily to evaluate teachers, this may have an unintended impact on the school culture and the school's receptiveness to change. Research indicates that when walkthroughs are used to support and coach teachers, through a more reflective as opposed to evaluative approach, a positive school culture develops, enhancing the comfort level of teachers and helping overcome reform obstacles (Freedman & LaFleur, 2003).

By continuing to utilize walkthroughs as a tool for evaluation, principals are missing an opportunity to use walkthroughs to positively impact school culture and create a school climate that is open and receptive to change.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant relationship between the level of administrative experience of a principal and that principal's purpose for conducting a walkthrough? Principals selected one of three experience levels in defining their demographic and responded to a survey question asking them

to identify the most important purpose for conducting a walkthrough in their school.

There were 43 principals with under five years of experience, 66 principals with five to ten years of experience and 65 principals with more than ten years of experience. There was no statistically significant association between the variables administrative experience and most important purpose for conducting a walkthrough. The Pearson chi-square results indicated that the assumptions were not met and the reported chi-square test resulted in a non-significant result ($X^2=14.839$, $df=12$, $N=174$, $p=.250$). This finding suggests that principals are not more likely to select a specific walkthrough purpose based on their experience level as a principal.

Despite the lack of a statistical association between a principal's experience level and their purpose for conducting a walkthrough, it is important to note that principals with less experience utilize walkthroughs far less as an evaluative tool than principals with more experience.

While principals in the survey indicated that the evaluation of teacher instruction delivery was the most important purpose for conducting walkthroughs, the principals with less experience indicated that gathering data to guide their decision making was the second most important purpose. This may be the start of a trend amongst newly hired principals that are placing a greater focus on using walkthroughs as a means of making decisions about the school as opposed to using them as a tool for evaluation.

Research Question 3: Is there a significant relationship between the level of administrative experience of a principal and whether or not that principal shares the results of the walkthroughs with teachers? Principals

selected one of three experience levels in defining their demographic and responded to a survey question asking if they share the results of their walkthroughs with teachers.

While the majority of principals (72.5%) share the results with teachers, it is of interest to note that there is a clear increase in the percentage of principals who share the results with teachers as the principal's level of experience increases—from 65.1% in principals with less than five years of experience to 66.2% in principals with less than ten years of experience to 84.1% in principals with more than ten years of experience. The statistical analysis resulted in a statistically significant association between a principal's level of experience and whether or not they share the results of walkthroughs with teachers. The Pearson chi-square results indicated that the assumptions were met, and the reported chi-square test resulted in a significant result ($X^2=6.763$, $df=2$, $N=171$, $p=.034$). The Cramer's V (0.199) indicated an approximate significance level of 0.034.

This indicated that there is a moderately strong association between principals' administrative experience levels and whether or not they share the results of walkthroughs with teachers. These findings suggest that principals are more likely to share the results of their walkthroughs with teachers based on their years of experience as a principal.

Principals who have been in the position for a longer amount of time may be more skilled in their ability to provide feedback to teachers and have more experience with engaging in professional discussions revolving around instructional practice.

Those who are newer in the position

may lack the confidence or skills to provide feedback to teachers, which would explain why less-experienced principals are not as likely to share the results of walkthroughs with teachers.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the concept of instructional leadership cuts across socioeconomic levels and a principal's level of experience as it pertains to the implementation of the walkthrough process. While it is clear that walkthroughs are used for many different purposes, the most frequent is to evaluate teacher instructional delivery. The principals in this study believe that walkthroughs should be used primarily to evaluate teacher instructional delivery.

Instructional leadership is necessary to improve teaching and learning in schools, but this study has shown that while principals value the use of walkthroughs as an evaluative tool and a means of gathering data on what is going on in the classroom, there is still a lack of consensus about how best to use the information that is gained from walkthroughs going forward. Once the walkthrough model is seen by both teachers and principals as a means of coaching and supporting teachers rather than evaluative, there will be a better chance of establishing sustainable school improvements in teaching and learning.

Change can only occur if everyone in the school setting is receptive to change: Principals need to prove their worth as instructional leaders and teachers need to develop a sense of trust in their principals. Through openness, trust and coaching, principals and teachers can establish a culture that is receptive to improving teaching and learning to the benefit of all students.

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