

# Walden University

College of Education

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Abstract

Secondary Principals' Perceptions of Classroom Instructional Walkthroughs

by

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MEd, South Carolina State University, 1983

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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## Abstract

Although many researchers have studied aspects of classroom instructional walkthroughs, there has been a gap in practice and research related to how middle school principals interpreted the functions and purposes of such walkthroughs and how they used them to enhance instruction. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the gap in knowledge and understanding of what middle school principals perceived as the function and purpose of classroom instructional walkthroughs. The conceptual framework was based on the 5 dimensions of teaching and learning. Research questions were derived from specific components of the framework and related to the function of classroom instructional walkthroughs and the influence of the walkthroughs on classroom instruction. Data for the study were collected through semistructured interviews with 7 secondary principals from a mid-Atlantic U.S. state. Data were coded using *in vivo* coding and Microsoft Word Doc Extract tool 1.3. Six key themes emerged: feedback to teachers, observe instructional delivery, focus on student learning, using data to improve instruction, building relationships, and professional learning to improve teaching. The key recommendation is that school division leaders explore professional development opportunities to engender a greater awareness of how principals use classroom instructional walkthroughs correctly and consistently as a strategy in their schools. Findings from the study may contribute to the knowledge on classroom walkthroughs and have implications for positive social change by identifying reflective practices, which can lead to high-quality continuous school improvement and facilitate systematic thinking in schools.

PREVIEW

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Angels in heaven: my son, Jamil Rashad Hamilton Frazier, and my mother, Viola Wright Hamilton. Thank you for watching over me. I also dedicate my dissertation to my beautiful and loving daughters, Jasmine Monet' and Janay Amber, who have given me the motivation to persevere throughout this journey. For God's Blessings, my granddaughters Faith, Hope, and Grace. To my husband, George, who believed in me from the beginning and faithfully continues to do so every day. His love and encouragement have made it possible to realize my potential. Finally, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is my everything! He has given me the Strength to finish my dream of earning my doctorate!

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PREVIEW

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Principals can effect positive outcomes in learning through classroom instructional walkthroughs, which are done to observe instruction in classrooms and ensure their quality (Gillespie, 2016). The classroom instructional walkthrough strategy is not new (Brion-Meisels, 2015); however, the purpose, types, and outcomes of this strategy have been transformed (Stout, Kachur, & Edwards, 2013). Therefore, studies on classroom instructional walkthroughs can help principals to focus on what is essential in their roles as instructional leaders in middle schools (Stout et al., 2013). If principals share a clear understanding of the function of effective classroom instructional walkthroughs, they can develop a shared vision and promote a culture of high-quality instruction in their buildings (Stout et al., 2013). When principals observe teachers, they can encourage reflective practices that can lead to initiatives for enhancing middle school students' academic successes as well as social change (Gabriel, 2018). Social change is the process of applying ideas or strategies to promote improvement (Callahan et al., 2012), which in public education can promote insights into challenging and complex subjects for school communities. The sections in this chapter include background, problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework for the study, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance, and summary.

### **Background**

There is a plethora of literature related to classroom instructional walkthroughs. Peters and Waterman introduced the concept of walkthroughs (McCarley, Peters, &

Decman, 2016), but many different descriptors were used to denote classroom instructional walkthroughs such as learning walks, instructional walks, focus walkthroughs, data walks, data snaps, mini observations, and instructional rounds (Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). Several corporations have successfully used a version of walkthroughs to improve their management practices, which is known as visible management (Xu & Brown, 2016). One corporation was United Airlines, which had managers walk around to interact and engage with employees. Another leading corporation was Hewlett-Packard, with a trademark management style known as management by wandering around.

Using the concept of management by wandering around, early pioneer school leaders Superintendent Tony Alvarado and Deputy Superintendent Elaine Fink of the Community School District 2 in the New York School system implemented classroom instructional walkthroughs. The walkthroughs were implemented as a routine practice for a team of district principals, central office leaders, and teachers. These individuals perceived that principals might work closely with their teachers and provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another (Stout et al., 2013). School leaders described their principals as critical listeners in the school district, who were in touch with their staff and attentive to what was occurring in their schools (Stout et al., 2013).

One of the essential characteristics of a successful instructional leader is the knowledge of the instruction and curriculum (Hsin-Hsiange & Mao-neng, 2015). School personnel at all administrative levels are continuously seeking ways to influence student achievement and produce better learning in school. The teaching and learning process is



initiated correctly when the principal has a clear understanding of what students are learning in classrooms and how teachers deliver the instruction to students. With a clear understanding of what occurs in the classrooms, principals can capture the most significant data to offer constructive feedback and influence professional development. Professional development can be based on data-driven feedback from the classroom observations, which can be used to identify research-based practices to enhance instructional strategies of teachers and learning of students (Jones, 2016).

Classroom instructional walkthroughs and high-quality continuous school improvement advance positive social change. Through reflection, collaboration with peers, and advocacy, positive change can occur (Selkrig & Keamy, 2015). Feedback to teachers from walkthroughs reinforces attention to effective instructional practices for teachers and contributes to collegial conversations about teaching and learning. Thus, school leaders, teachers, and educators must create a network system that will allow all to freely interact with peers and strengthen professional development opportunities. Further, professional development opportunities can facilitate meeting the needs of all learners and realizing that middle school students can benefit from educational practices such as classroom instructional walkthroughs. Professional development opportunities can support teachers in discovering better ways to personalize lessons using students' interests, cultures, and backgrounds, which makes lessons more relevant to students who may be underachieving (Gabriel, 2018).

Despite the benefit of instructional walkthroughs, a gap in practice related to classroom instructional walkthroughs has been identified. According to researchers

associated with the Center for Educational Leadership, a concern is that not all administrators may share a clear understanding of the function and purpose of classroom instructional walkthroughs (Fink & Markholt, 2017). Additionally, in middle schools across the United States, classroom instructional walkthroughs are likely to vary in structure and effectiveness (Fink & Markholt, 2017). But information gained on classroom observations can be a valuable administrative tool for instructional leaders (Stevenson, 2016).

This study was needed to engender a greater awareness in middle school principals to use instructional walkthroughs consistently as a strategy that contributes to continuous improvement focused on effective classroom instruction. Knowledge gained through this study can help close the gap in middle school principals not having a clear understanding of the function and purpose of the classroom instructional walkthroughs (Fink & Markholt, 2017; Stevenson, 2016). Further, the support of professional development and professional learning by researchers and university professors can help school leaders transform the learning environment into a warm and supportive milieu (Zepeda, Jimenez, & Lanoue, 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

Research has indicated that principals do not possess a clear understanding of the function and purpose of classroom instructional walkthroughs (Connor, 2015; Fink & Markholt, 2017; Garza, Ovando, & O'Doherty, 2016). But principals' walkthroughs are targeted short snapshots of what is going on in the classroom, which need to be effective for instructional leaders to improve the overall academics in the middle schools

(Cherkowski, 2016; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). This problem is relevant for middle school instructional leadership because findings from this exploration can help principals to (a) understand the function and purpose of conducting instructional walkthroughs; (b) use feedback from the observations to improve teaching and learning through professional development and other feedback methods; and (c) become better instructional leaders, as suggested in previous research (Cherkowski, 2016; Fink & Markholt, 2017).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what middle school principals perceived as the function and purpose of classroom instructional walkthroughs. The gap in knowledge and understanding can influence the work of principals as they continue to refocus their efforts, time, and attention as instructional leaders (Zepeda et al., 2015). The case study methodology used to explore the gap in knowledge and understanding was guided by assumptions in the naturalistic paradigm. There were four assumptions pertinent to the study: (a) there were many differences and realities principals possess concerning classroom instructional walkthroughs, (b) knowledge and use of instructional walkthroughs by principals were inseparable, (c) thoughts and beliefs of principals pertinent to instructional walkthroughs were constantly evolving, and (d) inquiry of principals on new instructional strategies were shaped by values that were sacred to these principals.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were derived from specific components of the framework of the study.

Research Question 1: What do principals perceive as the function of classroom instructional walkthroughs?

Research Question 2: How do principals view the influence of classroom instructional walkthroughs on classroom instruction?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework was created using the five dimensions of teaching and learning, which include purpose, student engagement, curriculum and pedagogy, assessment of student learning, and classroom environment and culture (Fink & Markholt, 2017; Van Vooren, 2018). Purpose is quality teacher instruction through the integration of state standards and objectives in lesson plans (Van Vooren, 2018). Student engagement has three parts: (a) intellectual growth of students (i.e., who is doing work in the classrooms and the nature of the classwork); (b) teacher engagement strategies that contribute to student engagement in the learning process, and (c) type of communication between teacher and student and student and student (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Curriculum and pedagogy are comprised of three components: curriculum, teaching strategies, and scaffolding for learning (Van Vooren, 2018). The curriculum is the alignment of instructional materials to the objectives in the lessons, and teaching strategies refer to how well instruction is aligned with pedagogical content knowledge. Scaffolding is the level of support provided by middle school teachers to students

throughout the entire lesson. Regarding assessment and learning, assessment of student learning is the teachers' use of multiple assessment methods to diagnose the occurrence of learning of diverse students in the classrooms (Alvoid & Black, 2014). Finally, classroom environment and culture refer to how well teachers use the entire physical environment of classrooms, quality of classroom routines, and how supportive the classroom culture is for the academic growth of students (Alvoid & Black, 2014).

The need for professional development evolving from feedback in classroom instructional walkthroughs is supported by the five dimensions of teaching and learning. According to Fink and Markholt (2017), an instructional framework can be designed from the feedback regarding instructional walkthroughs. The framework is useful to develop goals for professional learning and to implement professional development. Professional development in each of the five dimensions supports the middle school instructional leaders' vision for high-quality teaching and learning (McCarley, Peters, & Decman, 2016). Professional development supports the enhancement of teachers' and principals' instructional expertise and emphasizes continuous learning and improvement. Ongoing professional development helps teachers and principals to focus on finding optimum ways each student learn while providing insight and strategies into how to address the needs of students in the classroom (Fink & Markholt, 2017; Peguero & Bracy, 2015).

Various researchers have reported on the five dimensions and supported that the dimensions are aligned with classroom instructional walkthroughs and have improved academics in the middle schools at Grades 6, 7, and 8. Therefore, for this study, the tenets

of the five dimensions of teaching and learning supported the development of the research questions. The tenets were also embedded in the classroom instructional walkthrough semistructured interviews (CIWSIs; see Appendix A).

### **Nature of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what middle school principals perceived as the function and purpose of classroom instructional walkthroughs. Qualitative research is used to describe or capture the human experiences and perceptions related to those experiences (Daher, Carré, Jaramillo, Olivares, & Tomicic, 2017). The environment for the study was in a natural setting, and data reflected the perceptions of the secondary school principals. Participants in the sample were secondary principals from a diverse suburban/rural school district in a mid-Atlantic state. A convenience sample of middle school principals was invited to participate in one-on-one interviews.

The design was a descriptive and exploratory case study. A case study is a research strategy and an empirical inquiry to investigate a phenomenon (classroom instructional walkthroughs) within a real-life (middle schools in research setting district) context (Amankwaa, 2016). Case studies are based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group (middle school principals), or event to explore the causes of underlying principles (Connelly, 2016). The case study design and qualitative methodology were justified for the study because the study had a case (middle school principals in the same district) and a phenomenon (classroom instructional walkthroughs; see Amankwaa, 2016; Connelly, 2016). Additionally, the study's purpose statement and two qualitative research questions required an in-depth exploration to collect thick and

rich interview data. Thus, a case study design was justified to guide data collection and data analysis for the study's two research questions.

Data collection occurred through semistructured, one-on-one interviews. The method of interpretive analysis for qualitative data analysis explained by Marshall and Rossman (2016) and McNiff (2016) was followed. I described and employed the six phases of interpretive data analysis. The first phase of interpretive thematic analysis was familiarization with data, and the second phase required selecting units of meaning from the text or coding. The goal of the third phase was to assign groups of common codes to thematic groups. A review of the themes occurred in the fourth phase, and the fifth phase was defining and naming the themes of Phase 5, and the culminating phase comprised of creating a presentation of the results. Member checking ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. The participants' rights were protected through informed consent by providing principals with details on the purpose of the study, expectations for participation, confidentiality protocol, and their right to not participate or withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions.

### **Definitions**

*Classroom instructional walkthroughs:* Classroom instructional walkthroughs are short, informal observation of classroom teachers and students conducted by administrations, coaches, mentors, peers, and others, followed by feedback, conversation, and action (Stout et al., 2013).

*Effectiveness of principals:* The effectiveness of principals is the ability to be successful and produce the intended results related to teachers' instructional and students' academic outcomes to achieve desired results for schools (Selkrig & Keamy, 2015).

*Feedback from instructional walkthroughs:* Feedback from instructional walkthroughs is an accurate and straight-forward conversation from an evaluator or a professional on strategies (instructional walkthroughs) to help teachers improve instruction (Garza et al., 2016).

*Function of instructional walkthroughs:* Function of instructional walkthroughs is the purpose of walkthroughs, which is to improve the instruction of teachers and academic achievement of students (Vogel, 2018).

*Perceptions of principals:* Perceptions of principals are beliefs about the roles of instructional leaders concerning teachers' instructional effectiveness and students' academic achievement (Van Vooren, 2018).

### **Assumptions**

There were three assumptions in the study. First, I assumed that all principal participants in the study possessed a similar framework regarding the importance of instructional supervision. All principals were principals in the same school district who conducted classroom instructional walkthroughs, and the superintendent consistently emphasized that all principals should devote more time to instructional supervision. Second, it was assumed that the middle school principals in the district were actively involved in providing feedback from the walkthroughs to their teachers in a timely and convenient way through one or more of the following mediums: (a) professional