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Enhancing learning walks: leveraging focused observation and purposeful feedback

Ghazala Sajjad, Pakistan

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School context

Generation's, a large private school operating on two campuses in Karachi, Pakistan, serves over 3500 students from playgroup through to senior levels. With a faculty of 600, Generation's provides quality academic instruction rooted in values, and prepares students for Cambridge O and A Level examinations.

The school aims to foster academic, social and emotional growth through a vibrant, holistic learning environment. The school motto, 'Wings with roots' encapsulates the school's commitment to developing balanced and well-grounded personalities that are highly skilled and confident.

About the author

Ghazala Sajjad, with over 30 years of experience in education, serves as the Lead Curriculum and CPD at Generation's School in Karachi. She specialises in change management, learner-centred environments, and distributed leadership. Ghazala holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Applied Educational Leadership from the Institute of Education, UCL, and a Cambridge Programme Leader certification. Currently, she leads the internal CPD task force, focusing on aligning CPD experiences with teachers' needs. Additionally, Ghazala heads the induction programme for new teachers and is responsible for training and mentoring of middle leaders at her school.



Key learnings

This research looked at the benefits of structured learning walks where teachers observed each other's practices in order to foster collaborative learning and feedback.

- Middle leaders required training to conduct observations, analyse data, and offer targeted feedback to enhance teacher performance. Digital tools, like tablets, should be provided for efficiency and real-time feedback.
- School heads should be role models, fostering an environment of support by providing structures and recognition of contributions, while remaining approachable to all teachers.
- Skill development was observed in delivering constructive feedback, practising respectful communication, and cultivating a growth mindset.
- Difficulties with time management and scheduling observations were noted due to heavy workloads and disruptions.
- The research on learning walks underscored the significant benefits: it fostered skill enhancement, capacity building, and a culture of mutual learning for teachers and middle leaders. There was improvement in the uniformity of processes, leading to increased productivity.

'Middle leaders are bridges between teachers and management. Their behaviour can motivate teachers to participate in learning walks.'

Vice Principal

Action research rationale

Generation's boasts a robust CPD model, nevertheless, there is an essential need to better align professional development with observable teaching practices. This necessity has become more pronounced due to the school's rapid expansion, regularly bringing in new teachers. Steiny (2008) quotes Carbone: 'It's much easier to learn by watching teachers; you can see practice, good and bad, right in front of you.' However, teachers rarely get the opportunity to observe other teachers, and the traditional observation protocol conducted by school heads is often judgemental, and can be stressful.

To address this challenge, the study suggests 'structured learning walks' where teachers can mutually observe each other's practices. Led by middle leaders, these walks involve teachers visiting classrooms together, concentrating on refining instructional skills aligned with the Cambridge Teaching Skills Roadmap. The process entails pre-observation preparation, adhering to a set protocol, conducting observations, and post-observation reflection. These stages foster collaborative learning and feedback among teachers.

We focus on 12 middle leaders who serve as team leads across various school sections. Their role as 'expressive influencers' (Norris and Poulton, 2008) is crucial in fostering trust and acting as a catalyst for change. Thus, this research examines the impact of learning walks on middle leaders' capacity, along with exploring teachers' intrinsic motivation for reciprocal observation and reflection. Our primary goal is to cultivate an environment where teachers actively invite their team leaders and peers to visit their classrooms.

Exploratory research questions

1. How do I believe that learning walks will enhance the capacity of middle leaders?
2. What do teachers think are the benefits/challenges of learning walks?
3. What do leaders think they can do to encourage teachers to participate in learning walks?

Data collection procedure

Employing a multi-method approach, the study integrated a focus group, reflective writing prompts, and a questionnaire to enhance research credibility. Geared at exploring the situation more broadly, this exploratory research aimed to gather diverse perspectives and insights from various stakeholders.

The researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the study for reflections on related literature and informal notes on discussions and observations. A single focus group session involved four middle school leaders, aiming for diverse opinions and efficient communication. Twelve middle leaders from various academic domains participated in reflective writing prompts, selected through stratified random sampling. Additionally, 24 teachers, representing varied experience levels and teams, completed online questionnaires, addressing challenges and benefits during observations and learning walks.

Before the exploration began, consent was sought from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and their rights. In addition to written consent, the researcher verbally confirmed that the staff understood the research and were willing to participate. Any collected data remained confidential, and identifying details were anonymised to ensure participant privacy.

To refine the research tools and ensure their effectiveness, a pilot test was conducted on the focus group questions and questionnaires.

Figure 1: Generation's is a large private school in Pakistan with 3500 students and 600 faculty.





Figure 2: Themes from the focus group

Key findings from the exploration

The data underscores a prevalent awareness of the benefits of learning walks, signifying a collective recognition of the potential for growth through observation and feedback. However, challenges include the limited experience of both teachers and leaders, practicality and workload concerns.

Analysis and interpretation of the collected data revealed the following findings and observations.

- Leaders and teachers engage in ‘double seeing’, comparing their classrooms with observed ones (Tenenbergs, 2016).
- Middle leaders serve as mavens and expressive influencers, motivating teachers through expertise and persuasion.
- Team leads can facilitate positive relationships between teachers and peers, to create a trusting environment.
- Leadership experience is varied with 33% having one to three years as team leads and 25% with a decade’s experience.
- Leaders’ participation in learning walks also varies, with 25% never engaging, 16.7% once a year only, 25% once a term, and 25% participating weekly.
- Approximately 50% of teachers’ comments expressed positive sentiments towards learning walks, citing benefits like friendly collaboration and learning practices.
- Challenges, noted by 36.4%, revolved around practicality, teacher workload, and potential student distraction. 66.7% teachers feel that they rarely get time to observe their peers.

- 95.8% teachers think that opportunities to observe peers/leads will help them improve their own practice.
- 25% teachers are either indifferent or uncomfortable when others observe them during teaching.
- 83.3% of teachers say that receiving constructive feedback encourages them to participate in observation.
- 87.5% teachers think improved collaboration while participating in learning walks will improve classroom practices.

Action plan

The study indicates the middle leaders need capacity building sessions, emphasising trust development and non-judgemental feedback, for effective learning walks and fostering a collaborative professional development culture.

Hence the initial action plan is as follows.

Professional development

- Training sessions on ‘Focused observations and purposeful feedback’. A blended approach has been adopted for training to ensure learning is self-paced and accessible.
- Empower leaders to develop and implement structured debriefing sessions with clear protocols for effective knowledge exchange during the learning walks process.

Online resources for leaders and teachers

- OSS course: Leadership development, consisting of 2 modules:
 1. Leadership training - Planning, monitoring, evaluating and reviewing
 2. Engaging with leadership, management and leadership styles
- OSS module: Engaging with professional development - peer observation

Applying new knowledge in learning walks

- Team lead initiates learning walks and encourages peer observation.
- Schedule learning walks once per unit (every six weeks) involving section heads and team members to foster collaboration and shared professional development experiences.
- Practice learning walk and feedback protocols to develop mastery of the structured processes of observation.

QUESTION 1: What are your primary concerns or expectations regarding the upcoming training programme on observation and feedback skills? Rate each according to its importance.

Sub-questions	Pre Training Questionnaire			Post Training Questionnaire		
	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
Improving my own skills and practices in focused observations.	100%	0%	0%	98%	2%	0%
Improve my skills and practice in providing purposeful and timely feedback.	95%	5%	0%	98%	2%	0%
Ensuring active engagement of team members in the training sessions.	77%	13%	0%	84%	16%	0%
Addressing specific challenges within the team related to communication and collaboration.	74%	26%	0%	91%	9%	0%
Aligning the training programme objectives with the overall goals of the school.	86%	12%	2%	93%	7%	0%
Provision of resources and support by school leaders in order to facilitate the implementation / application of the training programme.	84%	14%	2%	91%	9%	0%

Figure 3: Pre and post training: The expectations and benefits gained by the middle leaders

Action plan implementation

The implementation of the action plan commenced early in the year, strategically aligning with the existing professional development framework of the school. This timing facilitated a smooth integration of training sessions for middle leaders, coinciding with the initiation of learning walks. The fortnightly sessions provided ample time and space for participants to apply newly acquired strategies and engage in reflective practices within their teams.

The training programme, spanning over two months, engaged 45 middle leaders from departments across the school. The focus was to equip educators with the necessary skills and strategies to transform observations into constructive and collaborative processes. Furthermore, the professional development experiences were designed to cultivate proficiency in delivering purposeful and effective feedback through deliberate practice and reflection.

During the sessions, meticulous protocols were developed by team leads to ensure efficiency and focus during learning walks. Collaborative opportunities for peer learning and feedback were integrated to foster a supportive learning environment and promote continuous improvement.

Overall, the implementation plan aims to empower educators with the necessary skills and support structures to facilitate effective learning walks and foster collaborative professional development within the school community.

Data collection procedures

As before, a multi-method approach with voluntary sampling was utilised, integrating pre- and post-training questionnaires, a focus group, and a reflective journal. This approach encouraged higher engagement and elicited more thoughtful and genuine responses, resulting in meaningful insights.

Online pre- and post-training questionnaires were completed by all 45 middle leaders who received the training and are conducting learning walks with their team teachers. This helped assess the impact of training on their competencies before and after implementation. Discussions were held to ensure participants understood the questions.

A focus group comprising five vice principals (VP) heading academic sections was conducted to gather valuable data and secure their ownership and support for the action research. The interview was recorded and transcribed using an online app.

Additionally, a reflective journal was maintained by the researcher to document reflections and ideas about the topic.

Consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were provided with a copy of the questions to prepare insightful and efficient responses. Confidentiality was maintained, and identifying details were anonymised to protect participant privacy. A pilot test was conducted to refine the research tools and ensure effectiveness.

Most importantly the exploratory research served as a pilot, resembling a learning spiral. As all middle leaders became engaged, the subsequent action research phase gained momentum, mirroring an upward progression within this spiral (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018).

‘It is easier to learn by observing our peers – like questioning techniques and wait time and then discussing it later.’
Teacher



Figure 4: Training Session for middle leaders.



Figure 5: Team lead with teachers: Feedback Huddle

The results of pre and post-training questionnaires reveal a notable improvement following the training. Despite varying initial skill levels among middle leaders, the programme effectively enhanced their existing competencies, leading to a positive shift in respondents' attitudes. Other findings to explore perceptions and behaviours include:

Pre-implementation phase: Focus group (VPs) and journal notes highlighted several key points:

- Middle leaders require training to effectively conduct observations, analyse data, and offer targeted feedback to enhance teacher performance.
- Expectations for the training included a structured approach with opportunities for reflection, feedback, and collaboration, while concerns centred around effective implementation.
- Building trust, setting clear standards, and fostering open communication were identified as priorities.
- School heads should be visible role models, fostering an environment of support by providing structures and recognition of contributions, while remaining approachable to all teachers.

Post-implementation phase: middle leaders reported the following:

- Skill development was observed in areas such as delivering constructive feedback, practising respectful communication, and cultivating a growth mindset.
- There was improvement in the uniformity of processes, leading to increased productivity.
- Ability to build trust so that teachers viewed learning walks as learning opportunities rather than evaluations.
- Difficulties with time management and scheduling observations were noted due to heavy workloads and disruptions.

The Learning Walk Protocol

The Learning Walk Protocol at Generation's School ensures a standardised, respectful and evidence-based approach to conducting classroom observations. Learning walks are a collaborative approach to gaining quick insights into each classroom to enhance teaching and learning.

Before Learning Walk

- Make a group (observers and teachers to be observed)
- Ensure a mixed group including academic coordinator, lead teacher/year tutor and teachers
- Schedule a learning walk
- Inform students prior to observation
- Define a focus area
- Review protocol

- Leave a note of appreciation for the teacher and students

After Learning Walk

Huddle: Share observations in corridor (5 minutes)
Debrief session

- Identify common themes across classrooms
- All team members to have an equal voice
- Feedback to be constructive (multiplier effect)
- Keep confidentiality and acknowledge teachers
- Highlight the collaborative nature of the debrief, ensuring a collective focus on observed learning

During Learning Walk

- Arrive and exit on time (total 8–10 minutes)
- Observe and gather evidence
- Don't be judgemental
- Minimise interaction with teachers/students

'Hands-on practice was provided during the sessions to actually give various types of feedback to teachers at different levels while maintaining respect.'

Middle Leaders

‘Learning walks foster collaborative learning and feedback among teachers. It is reinvigorating for the community as a whole to participate in this exercise, enabling us to share our insights, experiences, and best practices on both local and global levels.’

School Director

Conclusion

The action research on learning walks underscores significant benefits: fostering skill enhancement, capacity building, and a culture of mutual learning for teachers and middle leaders. However, challenges like consistency and compliance persist due to time constraints and awareness gaps. School heads’ visibility in sustaining practices through support and direct assistance to teachers is crucial.

Leveraging focused observation and feedback can yield substantial outcomes when integrated effectively into the school’s culture. Consistency in scheduling, and embedding training into core roles, fosters trust and ensures it is not seen as burdensome. Also, promoting a growth mindset in feedback enhances the learning experience and encourages a can-do attitude.

The next step for middle leaders involves training to analyse and interpret data. Digital tools like tablets will also be provided to middle leaders to enhance efficiency and enable real-time feedback, streamlining the process for accessibility and tracking.

Enhancements in the school development cycle could involve integrating learning walks into the Generation’s Improvement Framework. This ensures they contribute to continuing professional development, improvement spirals, engagement mechanisms, and bridging the gap. Learning walks, if consistent and seen as important, can mark a turning point in fostering teacher leadership, benefiting the broader school community.

It is reinvigorating for the community as a whole to participate in this exercise, enabling us to share our insights, experiences, and best practices on both local and global levels. In this context, it is important to remember that small deeds may seem insignificant, but they ripple out with great impact!

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