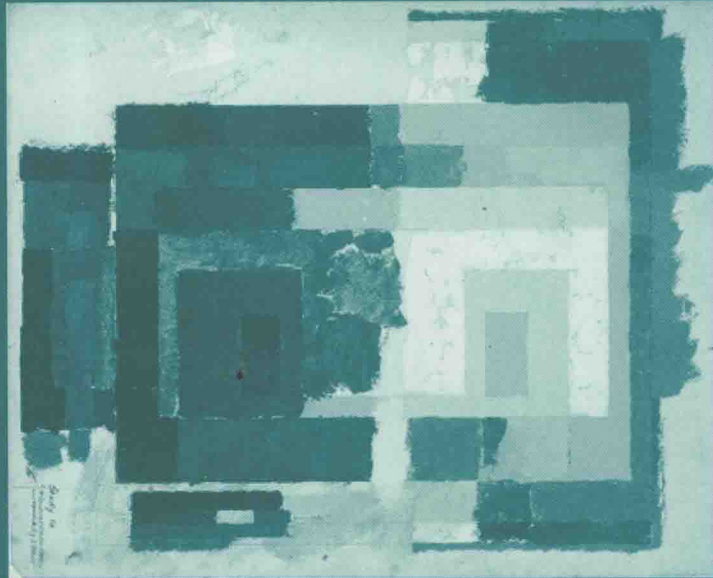


A Guide to Observation and Participation

THIRD EDITION

IN THE CLASSROOM

AN INTRODUCTION TO EDUCATION



Arthea J. S. Reed
Verna E. Bergemann
Mary W. Olson

A Guide to Observation
and Participation
In the Classroom
An Introduction to Education

Third Edition

Arthea J.S. Reed

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Verna E. Bergemann

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Mary W. Olson

University of North Carolina at Greensboro



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IN THE CLASSROOM: AN INTRODUCTION TO EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

A Guide to Observation and Participation in the Classroom, Third Edition is written for you, the student. However, it is designed to help you move beyond being a student. It provides you with sequenced school-based observation and teaching experiences that not only will bridge the gap between the world of the student and the world of the teacher, but also will help you connect the world of theory to the world of practice. In beginning the process of becoming an effective teacher, you must learn to view students, schools, and teachers as a teacher would. In addition, you must develop, practice, and reflect on the skills and techniques of effective teaching in order to perfect them.

Because observation to gain knowledge and understanding must come first, the first three chapters of the guide deal with observing teachers, classrooms, and students. Throughout each of these chapters you will find numerous examples of methods of observation that have been completed by student observers in the field. The observation techniques have been designed to help you become a critical and objective observer.

Once you have had the opportunity to reflect on your observations, the second section of the guide provides you with guidance for developing a gradual and reflective approach to becoming a teacher and includes many of the tools and techniques used by effective teachers. The first chapter of this section explains the importance of classroom participation during teacher training. Subsequent chapters provide you with information for preteaching, planning, tutoring, teaching small groups, teaching large groups, and reflecting on your teaching.

Finally, following the chapters, you will find copies of all of the observation and participation forms and instruments that have been discussed throughout this guide, numbered to coincide with the completed samples. These can be removed from the book and duplicated for your use. Each of these has been extensively field-tested by college and university students over a period of two decades.

The authors of this guide hope that as you complete and reflect on each of these observation and participation activities you will strengthen your resolve to teach and deepen your understanding, knowledge, and skills of effective teaching.

Arthea J. S. Reed
Verna E. Bergemann
Asheville, NC

Mary W. Olson
Greensboro, NC

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1

OBSERVING TEACHERS

Observation is one effective means of learning how certain teaching methods are employed in the schools, how classrooms are organized, and how students respond to the classroom environment. This guide will provide the future teacher with information on the processes of observation and participation in general and with specific forms that can be used in specific classroom situations.

Observing in Classrooms

One important technique for learning about effective teaching is to observe effective teachers at work in their classrooms. This is a skill, however, that needs to be developed in order to yield the best results. As education professors and authors Michael Morehead and David Cropp suggest, “observation which is conducted by the preservice teacher without the benefit of a prescribed structure . . . may not assist in the development of a future teacher” (1994, 2). One needs to know what to look for, how to look for it, and how to be objective in one’s analysis.

In the following excerpts, two different university students observe the same teacher in a second-grade classroom. Note how, in their analyses, they came to different conclusions.

SARAH’S OBSERVATION LOG

As soon as the bell rang the children moved quietly to their seats. They seemed to know exactly what to do, exactly what was expected of them. They put their books in their desks and folded their hands on top of the desk as Mrs. Menotti instructed the two class monitors to collect the lunch money and the picture money. She reminded them to have each child check off his name on the list when

his money was turned in. As the students did this Mrs. Menotti read the morning announcements. All the time she read she was monitoring the students collecting the money. There were no disruptions, and the students seemed to collect the money in an orderly fashion. She did not call the roll, but I saw her put the attendance on the outside of the classroom door. Because the children have assigned seats, she can simply look to see who is not present. All of this was accomplished in less than ten minutes.

Mrs. Menotti told the children she would meet first with the red reading group in the reading circle. The other children would find their assignments on the board written in the color of their reading group. What a great idea! I'll have to remember this one. The children quietly took out their books, and all but two began to work while Mrs. Menotti was telling the reading group what to do. When she looked up and saw one child not working and another talking to the child next to him, she went to the board and wrote their names on it. The children immediately got to work.

Though I couldn't really hear the reading group I could see the flip chart on which Mrs. Menotti had written letter combinations that would be used in the story. I could tell that each child was reading round robin fashion and that Mrs. Menotti interrupted only when the child needed help sounding out a word.

Since the rest of the class was working quietly in their workbooks, I took this time to look at the classroom. I was impressed with how neat and organized it was. All the desks were in neat rows. In the right front of the room is the reading circle. Mrs. Menotti sits so that she can see the children in the circle and the rest of the room. On the walls are colorful posters. The bookshelves are very carefully organized. On the bulletin board behind Mrs. Menotti's desk is a neat display of student work. All of the work on the board is very nicely done and displayed. There is an overhead projector in the front of the room. Also there are maps and a globe. There are lots of dictionaries and books in the book cabinets. There are no papers on the floor and the children keep their books in their desks. Mrs. Menotti keeps the shades drawn most of the way down so the children are not distracted.

Only once during the reading group did Mrs. Menotti have to stop to reprimand a student. It was one of the same students as earlier and she went to the board to put a check next to his name and reminded him that it was not art time and he shouldn't be drawing and should be working in his workbook. He put his drawing in his desk, but I noticed that he did not concentrate on his workbook, but doodled around the edge of the page. At one point, I noticed that he was doing his drawing inside his desk. Mrs. Menotti did not seem to notice, and I wondered if I should tell her.

After about twenty minutes, the reading groups changed in an orderly fashion. The blue group went to the reading circle and the red group took out their books and began doing the assignments written in red on the board.

I was really impressed by the order and organization in this classroom. Almost all the students were quiet and actively involved in their work. Mrs. Menotti was able to work with the few students in the reading group. I hope I can have an orderly classroom like this one some day.

STEVE'S OBSERVATION LOG

The same morning Steve observed in Mrs. Menotti's classroom. Here are some excerpts from his observation log:

I got to the classroom about ten minutes before the bell was to ring. I introduced myself to Mrs. Menotti. Though she seemed friendly and told me to make myself at home, I had the feeling that she was distracted and rather cool. The children were having a wonderful time talking and giggling in small groups. The boys in the group nearest me were talking about the soccer game. They were really excited that they had won. I already knew that I'd like these children. They were enthusiastic, bright-eyed, and bushy-tailed.

When the bell rang, everything changed. The atmosphere became rigid. Mrs. Menotti stood in the front of the room, staring at the class. She didn't say anything, but her message was clear, "It's time to get to work." The students stopped talking and moved to their desks, which were in rigid rows. Mrs. Menotti never smiled or said "Good morning"; she just told the two monitors to collect lunch and picture money as she read the announcements. I noticed that the students selected as monitors appeared to be upper class students in expensive-looking clothes. While they were taking the money, one of them seemed to be giving some of the less well-dressed children a hard time, but Mrs. Menotti did not seem to notice. Since the children's seats seemed to be assigned she took attendance without calling roll. Though the class is orderly, it seems as if the children might as well not be there. The only ones Mrs. Menotti has called by name are the monitors. I think my first impression was right; Mrs. Menotti is a very cold woman.

I couldn't help notice how cold the classroom is. The only work of the children that is displayed is behind Mrs. M.'s desk where the children can't go easily. It looks like perfect penmanship papers to me. The only other decoration in the room is mass-marketed posters that look like they've been here since Mrs. M. started teaching twenty years ago. The shades are down, and the only light in the room is artificial. I would hate to be a student here, and my sense is the children don't much like it either. I've not seen one smile since the bell rang.

When it was time to go to reading group, Mrs. Menotti called the red group to the circle. Is this class ability grouped? I think so. It looks like all the children in the red group wear designer clothes. The two monitors are in that group. When they get in the group, Mrs. M. notices two boys who have not yet started to work in their workbooks. It seems that one boy can't read the assignment on the board, and I can understand why. He's in the yellow group so the assignment is written in yellow and hard to see from where he sits. However, Mrs. M. does not ask why he is talking, she just puts his name on the board. I notice a tear in his eye. I am beginning to dislike Mrs. Menotti. Another boy is fussing in his desk. He doesn't seem to be able to find his book, so his name goes on the board, too.

I watch the reading group for about ten minutes, and it looks deadly. Mrs. Menotti has letter combinations on the flip chart. As the children read in order she points to the letters and asks them to make the sound. It seems to me these children read very well and do not need this kind of instruction. Since I am bored I decide

to walk around to see what kind of seat work the kids are doing. Each group seems to be working on a different page in the same workbook. I can tell who the "smart" kids are. They can tell, too. At one point, Mrs. Menotti stops the reading group to yell at the same boy who could not see the board earlier. He is still not doing his work. I noticed earlier that he was drawing, and he's a really good artist. But, she does not acknowledge his ability, instead his name gets a check and she tells him he can come in after school to do his seat work. So much for the value of art in this classroom!

It's no wonder so many kids drop out of school before they graduate. Mrs. Menotti has already decided that Shane, the artist, will be one of them. What hope is there for Shane?

Conclusion. Both Sarah and Steve observed the same class during the same period of time; each saw a totally different Mrs. Menotti in a radically different situation. Sarah's Mrs. Menotti was well organized, and the classroom environment was conducive to work and study. Steve's Mrs. Menotti distanced herself from the students, and the environment was controlled and nonproductive. How could two students from the same university class see such different things in the identical classroom?

EFFECTIVE OBSERVATION

Most simply, observation is the act or practice of paying attention to people, events, and/or environment. The difficulty with observation is that every individual brings to an event his or her psychological perception of it.

However, not all observation is subjective. It also can occur systematically and be conducted fairly objectively. The fact that Sarah and Steve were required to observe in Mrs. Menotti's classroom means that the observation was deliberate, and, therefore, more formalized than everyday observation. However, it was not systematic. **Systematic observation** is long-term observation involving visiting a classroom many times and observing many different situations. It is planned, objective, and goal or question oriented. The observers identify beforehand what they are looking for and how they will carry it out. Sarah and Steve did neither. Thus, their observations may simply have reinforced their existing prejudices, thereby "arresting or distorting the growth from further experiences" (Evertson and Green, 95).

Objectivity in Observation. Because teachers and classrooms are so different, observation can be difficult. If the observer tries to do more than record exactly what he or she has seen, the conclusions will be filtered through his or her prejudices and biases.

The goal of the systematic observer, then, is to gather as much data as possible over a period of several observations about the classroom, the students, the teacher, and the curriculum. Pierce states that in order for observations to be of practical use "they must be structured and focused on specific events that the students have been well prepared to identify and analyze" (1996, 218). The more data identified and analyzed the easier it will be to get a complete picture. The methods of obtaining as objective a point of view as possible involve anecdotal observation, structured observation, and interview. The goal of this chapter is to help you develop as a teacher by providing you with objective, systematic observation tools and techniques as the beginning step to learning how effective

teachers teach. In subsequent chapters, you will find tools for objective observations of classrooms, students, and schools.

Techniques of Observation. Anecdotal observations focus on the situation and specifically on who says or does what rather than on personalities or interpretations of events. Structured observations are formal and require that observers look for and record specified information that is called for on such things as checklists, sociograms, and profiles. The interview is a technique that seeks to find information through direct questioning. This method can be extremely valuable in understanding a procedure one has observed or the rationale behind it. The interview must be planned for and conducted as objectively as possible.

Anecdotal Observation

Anecdotal observations focus on exactly what occurs in a classroom or on what a child does or says in a specific situation over a limited period of time. Anecdotal observations are informally recorded in narrative in an observer's observation log. As much as possible, they are an exact description of a classroom event or incident. Anecdotal observations are simple to do. Observers need no training, but must follow the rules of all **objective observation**: (1) the observer must observe the entire sequence or event, (2) goals, limits, or guidelines must be set, (3) the observation should be recorded completely and carefully, and (4) observation must be as objective as possible.

OBSERVING THE ENTIRE EVENT OR SEQUENCE

Typically, anecdotal observations deal with what might be called minimal situations. The observer watches one child or one teaching or management technique for a specified period of time over several observations. This allows the observer to make dated notes while focusing attention on a single element or individual in the classroom or school. The minimal situation technique narrows the observer's focus to one event. Trying to follow too many elements of the classroom at one time usually leads to incomplete observation of all of them. Focusing on too much caused Sarah and Steve to make inaccurate judgments.

SAMPLE FORM 1

Anecdotal Record Form for Observing Teachers or Instructional Events — 1

Name of Observer: Karen Susan Richie

Date and Time of Observation: December 2, 19—, 10:30 a.m.

Length of Observation: Approximately 35 minutes

Person and/or Event Observed: Mrs. Menotti teaching a reading lesson

Grade Level and/or Subject: Second grade, reading

Objective of Observation: To determine how Mrs. Menotti works with individuals within the reading group

Instructions to the Observer: As completely and accurately as possible, describe the person or the event. If appropriate, include direct quotes and descriptions of the location or individual. Try to avoid making judgments.

Mrs. Menotti called the red group, the Space Invaders, to the reading corner at the right rear of the classroom. "Be sure to bring your free reading books with you, Space Invaders," said Mrs. M.

I move over to the reading corner so I can better observe the group. The reading corner is next to the window and the students' chairs are arranged in a circle. Mrs. M.'s chair is a large, wooden slat rocking chair next to the bookcase. Her chair is in the circle of chairs.

The students get their books from their desks. Joey says, "Mrs. M., I finished my book, and I need to see if I can find it in the library." "Is it in the classroom library, Joey?" Mrs. M. asks. "Yes." "O.K., you can look for it Joey. Just don't disturb the rest of us while you're looking."

Once all the students (except Joey) are seated in the circle, Mrs. M. takes out her own book. She says to Joey, "Have you found it?" "Not yet," Joey replies. "Well, join us while I read, and you can go back to the library and look afterward."

Mrs. M. asks Melody if she can remember what happened last in the story. (I can't see the title of the book Mrs. M. is reading from. I must remember to ask her later.) Melody begins to tell the story. Melody talks so quietly that it is difficult to hear her. Mrs. M. asks the other students some questions. "Sandy, can you remember what happened to the rabbit when the boy got sick?" "They took him from the nursery," Sandy says. "They were afraid the rabbit was comintated [sic]," says Maggie. "Do you mean 'contaminated'?" asks Mrs. M. Maggie looks at her hands. "Yes," says Maggie very quietly. "Very good, Maggie. That's right," says Mrs. M. Maggie looks up and smiles. "Why do you think they were afraid the rab-

bit might be contaminated, Sean?" Sean replies, "Well, he was stuffed and the boy is real sick, so the rabbit might have germs." "Very good, Sean," says Mrs. M.

She begins to read. All the students are listening. After each page she shows the children the illustration on the page. She reads one page and turns to the next and Sean says, "Hey, Mrs. M., you forgot to show us the picture." "There isn't one on that page, Sean."

She reads for about ten minutes and asks, "Do you like the story, Abbie?" Abbie nods her head. "Why do you like it?" she asks. "I like the boy and I want him to get well and get his rabbit back. It's sad," says Abbie. "Do you like sad stories, Mark?" "Yes, sometimes," says Mark. "Is the story you've been reading sad?" "No," Mark says. "Would you tell us about your book, Mark, please?" Mark does. It's the story of a space trip to Mars taken by a little boy. Melody says, "Did he really take that trip, Mark? I think it was all a dream." "No," says Mark, "It was real." "How do you know, Mark?" asks Sean. Mark says back very loudly, "Because the book doesn't say it's a dream." "Yeah," says Melody, "but in the beginning of the book he's in bed, and in the end he's back in his bed." Mark is quiet. Mrs. M. smiles, "When you read a story you can decide for yourself what it means. If Melody thinks it was a dream, that's O.K., even if Mark doesn't think it's a dream. Why don't you read it, Melody, and see if you still think it's a dream." Melody does not answer. Mrs. M. turns to Joey and says, "Joey, do you want to get your book so that you can tell us about it after Abbie tells us about hers?"

[Karen's observation continues until the reading group is over.]

SETTING GOALS, LIMITS, OR GUIDELINES

As with all observation, the observer must know the objective of the observation. What is it the observer hopes to see in the classroom or school? The observer may simply want to explore how the teacher communicates with individual students, as Karen observed in this sample anecdotal record form for observing teachers. Another way to do this is to keep a simple anecdotal record of student-teacher communication. The observer writes down as accurately as possible all the communication that occurs between the teacher and one student during a specified period of time. Since one important element of an effective school is good communication, examining how the teacher communicates with individual students can reveal a great deal about whether or not the classroom is effective. Of course, several observations of this student and other students would be required before a judgment could be made.