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*Changing Mathematics Education by
Educating for Change*



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Educating for Change**

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CULTIVATING A POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE THROUGH AFFIRMING LEARNING WALKS

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For teachers to transform their classrooms in ways that help students feel more valued and capable, teachers need to feel valued and capable themselves. An Affirming Learning Walk (ALW) is an observation protocol that aims to celebrate teachers' assets. Unlike feedback often viewed by teachers as overly critical, ALWs offer an opportunity for teachers to be observed and given solely positive feedback. In this report, we share the findings of an analysis of 51 responses to a survey inquiring about teachers' perspectives with the ALW protocol. In addition to offering teachers a welcomed shift from more critical forms of observation, we saw evidence of ALWs fostering a positive transformational culture among the participants.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, Observation, Evaluation

Introduction: Study Objectives, Perspectives, and Conceptual Framework

Teaching effectively is hard, but promoting change to improve teaching may be harder. Johnson et al. (2017) identified three levers of change: (a) creating a positive, transformational culture, (b) providing access to challenging curricula, and (c) enacting instruction that fosters engagement and mastery, arguing the first lever as foundational for the other two. We investigated teachers' experiences in one approach to fostering a positive, transformational culture, called *Affirming Learning Walks* (ALWs). For schools to transform, constituents must grow to trust and value one another. ALWs are designed to foster this growth (Ross et al., 2023).

ALWs are centered on the belief that all teachers bring strengths to their practice, and that change begins with feeling trusted, valued, and respected by peers and leaders. ALWs share characteristics with other learning walks and observations. For example, they include brief classroom visits (Allen & Topolka-Jorisson, 2014; Fisher & Frey, 2014; Steiny, 2009), involve teachers accompanying school leaders in the walks (Bushman, 2006), focus observations and feedback on student learning (Bole & Farizo, 2013), and place debriefs immediately after observations (Finch, 2010). Unlike traditional observations, teachers focus solely on identifying the positive aspects of each other's practice that foster trust, respect, and care (Noddings, 2001).

During ALWs, teachers look for evidence of eight teaching practices shown to improve student learning (Johnson et al., 2019; see Figure 1), referred to here as the NCUST practices. Johnson et al. (2017, 2019) have identified the first practice, *Making Students Feel Valued and Capable*, as the most critical for supporting exceptional student learning. In turn, they recognize that teachers, too, must feel valued and capable to effectively support their students and continue to learn and grow. This practice constitutes the conceptual orientation that guides this study.

Figure 1: Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools (adapted from Johnson et al., 2019)

1. Making students feel value and capable	5. Checking for understanding, providing feedback, and adapting instruction
2. Focusing on understanding and mastery	6. Building fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary
3. Promoting clarity	7. Promotion successful practices
4. Ensuring culturally, socially, and personally responsive teaching	8. Leading students to love learning

Affirming Learning Walks

An ALW is a classroom observation activity involving a small group of teachers and a teacher leader. During the ALWs in this study, a teacher leader and a group of 2-3 other teachers observed each others' classrooms over a sequence of observations, ensuring that all participants both observed and were observed. Prior to the ALWs, the teacher leaders and participating teachers met to discuss the protocol, read a description of the NCUST practices, and practiced debriefing using a ten-minute sample video. Each round of an ALW included a 10–15-minute observation of one of the participants teaching within their own classroom. As the observed teacher conducted their lesson, the observing teachers took note of the effective ways the teacher enacted the lesson, how students interacted with others, and how the classroom environment was set up. Observers were given a form to organize their observations using the NCUST practices (see Figure 1).

For ALWs, debriefing conversations always follow a similar pattern. The debrief take place immediately following the observation. The debriefing conversations are unique in that the observers only identify observed practices that were productive for student learning. Neither suggestions for improvement nor questions are offered by the observing teachers. For up to three rounds of feedback, each teacher shares one feature that they noticed that they felt was conducive to student learning, explicitly links that feature to one of the NCUST practices, and explain the importance of the feature in supporting student learning. The participating teachers are also given the following sentence frame to guide their feedback: “I noticed/observed/saw/heard the teacher/student/students did/said/showed/didn’t _____ which aligns with NCUST practice _____ and is important because _____.”

The debriefing conversation was designed for the observed teacher to experience a high volume of affirmation for their practice; in the end, the goal is to enable teachers to feel more efficacious about their teaching and motivated toward their own professional growth. As Aguilar (2016) noted, by identifying strengths, teachers will be encouraged to enact those features of their practice because they have been identified as important for students’ learning. To understand teacher takeaways from ALWs, we posed the research question: *During ALWs, what are the experiences of teachers when being observed and receiving positive feedback?*

Mode of Inquiry/Methods

We collected open-ended survey data from 51 K-12 public school mathematics and science teachers, representing 18 schools from six school districts, who took part in the ALWs. The survey asked about the teachers’ experiences both being observed and observing other teachers’ teaching. For our study, we focused on the participating teachers’ responses to two questions regarding their experiences being observed: “What thoughts do you have about being observed?” and “What thoughts do you have about the debrief of your teaching/class?”

For each question, every response was reviewed and divided into multiple segments of distinct meanings. One researcher reviewed and grouped all the segments based on similarity, leading to an initial coding scheme. Two members of the team then coded the responses with the scheme and met to compare and resolve any differences in the application of codes. Additionally, each response was coded for its overall tone—*positive*, *negative*, or *neutral*—to account for the different sentiments teachers had about their experience with ALWs. The researchers then generated a set of themes characterizing responses for each question—that is, one set of themes related to the teachers’ experiences being observed through the protocol and another set of themes related to their experiences receiving positive feedback.

Results

Thoughts About Being Observed

Responses to the observation component of the ALW protocol were overwhelmingly positive (88.2%, $N = 51$). Five responses (9.8%) were neutral, and one response (2.0%) was negative. The responses revealed three themes: (a) existing sentiments toward observations; (b) ALW features that eased anxiety; and (c) challenges teachers experienced with being observed.

A majority (60.8%) reported some anxiety about observations, despite knowing the focus was on positive feedback. For instance, Casey shared, “I am a second-year teacher and for me observation[s] do make me nervous. I anticipate/assume every time an administrator enters my room I am being evaluated which will impact my rehire.” Still, of these 31 teachers who expressed anxiety at being observed, 41.9%, also valued being observed. Harley explained, “I always feel nervous and anxious when I am observed no matter who is observing, but I am also pretty open to being observed **because I know it betters my practice.**” Finally, 14 teachers (27.5%) expressed openness to observation without noting anxiety, suggesting that these feelings were not universal.

Several elements of the ALW protocol made teachers more optimistic about being observed and improved their overall experience. For instance, 23 participants (45.1%) mention that the centrality of non-critical feedback encouraged them to be more excited about being observed. For example, Ash mentioned, “I was always stressed out and just waiting for them [school leaders] to **pick apart my lessons** and my teaching style... **I was excited to hear JUST the positive aspects** of my teaching in this observation opportunity.”

While the ALW protocol forgoes critique, several teachers nonetheless viewed ALWs as an opportunity to continue or expand upon good teaching practice. Specifically, 20 teachers (39.2%) characterized ALWs as a valuable learning opportunity. Billie, as an example, shared, “I would be willing to be observed more often to ensure that I am consistent with the positive interactions that I have with my students,” highlighting how ALWs can motivate more positive attitudes toward observation and the continued enactment of student-supportive practices.

The protocol was not free from challenges for the participants, with nine participants (17.6%) describing concerns beyond anxiety related to observations. The most frequent concern was the short observation time, mentioned by six participants. For example, Drew mentioned, “I wanted to get feedback on what normally happened in our room and was concerned that the 15-minute interval would disrupt that goal.” Others noted the potential inauthenticity when many observers were present. However, of the nine who raised concern, 6 expressed an overall positive experience.

Experience of the Debrief

The majority of responses related to the debrief were positive (86.3%), while 9.8% were neutral and 3.9% were negative. Interestingly, the two negative responses described discomfort from hearing the positive features of their teaching. Three themes emerged from the teachers' experiences with ALW debriefs: (a) receiving positive and valuable feedback; (b) notable takeaways and impact from debriefs; and (c) meaningful characteristics of the ALW.

Three fourths of teachers remarked on the value and positivity of the feedback they received. For example, Remi excitedly remarked on the positive tone of the feedback, saying, “It was helpful to hear what other observers noticed related to some of the teaching practices I was using in my classroom.” Remi. Speaking to the emotional impact of the positive feedback in contrast with the challenging work of teaching, Avery explained, “I felt so good about myself at the debrief. I work so hard and to actually have the little things that nobody else sees recognized was

so amazing to hear.” Overall, the feedback as positive and valuable was a central part of the debrief experience for the teachers

Out of the 28 teachers who discussed the positive nature of the debrief, 17 (60.7%) also reported on either being made aware of previously overlooked teaching practices or an increase in motivation and/or confidence. Jessie mentioned, “I was very surprised that I was doing more positive things toward learning then [sic] I realized when pointed out in the debriefing. **It also encouraged me to add things** to my classroom that could help students daily.” Here, Jessie noted that being made aware of the positive aspects of their teaching prompted their motivation to continue to add to their teaching practice. Another teacher, Quinn, reported that the debrief increased their sense of accomplishment as an educator; they mentioned, “usually, we focus on what we do wrong or what we need to improve. **Being part of the debrief where all feedback is all positive can make one feel accomplished.**” Other comments included references to emotional boosts and newfound energy to finish the year.

About two thirds of the teachers, 70.6%, discussed the distinct characteristics of the ALWs. Leslie commented on the lack of judgment during the debriefs, “It was nothing like I expected. The debrief made me feel like we are **ACTUALLY a learning community**... there was no judgement, just understanding and **true camaraderie.**” Leslie connected the positive framing of feedback to a gained sense of community. Also, the teachers observed that ALWs identified practices they were not aware of themselves; for example, Ellis noted, “It was great to hear what other people saw happening in my classroom because sometimes I am not aware of all the little things I do that contribute to a positive learning environment.” Additionally, the teachers often compared the positive nature of the ALWs to more traditional observations. For example, Addison mentioned, “**I have never been in a debrief where it was all positive** and there was nothing that was given to me or nothing, I gave to someone where it was an area to work on or strengthen.” Addison’s response highlighted a stark contrast with past debriefs, expressing disbelief that the ALW included no areas for improvement.

Implications and Discussion

We found that ALWs have great potential to foster a positive transformational culture among teachers—a foundation for access to challenging curricula and effective instruction (Johnson et al., 2017). The ALWs afforded teachers opportunities to feel respected and to celebrate the demanding work of teaching. Many also reported a sense of community developing through ALWs. Developing community can be challenging, especially given teachers’ past negative experiences with observations. ALWs appeared to salve those experiences and promote growth. For administrators hesitant to focus only on positive aspects during observations, our work suggests that ALWs encourage a positive transformational culture, trust and respect among teachers, and, perhaps paradoxically, teacher learning.

Our work relates to the conference theme, *Changing Mathematics Education by Educating for Change*, by showing how changes in teacher observations may better motivate teachers to maintain student-supportive practices. Johnson et al. (2019) position the practice of “making students feel valued and capable” as an anchoring practice for improving student learning. However, the ALW protocol was designed under the philosophy that for teachers to create transformative environments where students feel valued and capable, teachers need to feel valued and capable themselves. We contend that ALWs foster exactly this, acting as a lever for teachers to build toward a greater positive transformational culture within their school and empowering teachers to enact the change necessary to support all learners.

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