

Observing Teachers

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In my visit to schools as part of the clinical supervision of teachers, I have been able to witness who teachers really are. Some people scoff at the notion of “teaching practice” as part of the teacher education exercise, with the comment that it is merely a show for the occasion. The cynics, especially those who haven’t travelled that road, proffer that when the supervision is all over and the passing grade has been attained, it will be “back to normal” with no earth-shattering lessons or teacher efforts.

To a large extent, the teacher-in-training may be viewed as a starry-eyed romantic full of innovative ideas and hope. But what has been interesting as I observe them prepare for their teaching practice is that they are able to generate genuine interest and support from the more seasoned teachers on their staff. One can only hope that such collaboration and camaraderie function to keep the passion for the profession aglow as they share with their colleagues their aspirations, their plans, and even their frustrations.

On Field Days, when I visit their schools with a group of ten of their peers, I have been able to observe the hosting skills of teachers. On some of these occasions, the hospitality that has been extended has been akin to a visit to someone’s home. For me, the preparations for such a visit convey a message of pride in one’s professional setting, of a personal comfort level, and of an accompanying support system within the school—a personal and a professional pride.

Such visits demand finely tuned logistic skills as the host teacher sometimes works against what can be overwhelming odds. I am aware that on many occasions, she may use her personal resources to make the visit physically comfortable. As much as the individual teacher has a contribution to make to the culture and ethos of a school, so do other personnel. Administrators of schools must emphasise the unwritten but preferred behaviour and attitudes of any person associated with the organisation. Standards do speak for themselves.

Some school cultures are foreshadowed on entry to the school compound. The school guard is normally the visitor’s first human encounter in a school and should set the tone. His or her behaviour could be perceived as forming part of the school’s message. It is interesting to note that at a particular school that I visited, the attitude of the security guard did not lend a professional air to the compound and that the teacher being observed at that school had confessed to having problems with classroom management. She demonstrated a certain degree of helplessness in a situation that did not provide the support that she needed. A visit there on a normal day showcased a series of scratch bombs during class time and a student fight on the corridor during the recess break.

When teachers in training are being “observed,” it is with the intention of looking for growth and for areas in the teaching practice that require guidance. As part of their training they are equipped with skills in classroom technology. Multi-media projectors facilitate PowerPoint presentations and eliminate the use of cumbersome charts and

photocopies. They can enhance learning through the use of visuals. Classroom observations reveal to us that though teachers are eager and excited, for some there is no equipment with which they can be innovative. We learn from some that the equipment is stored and not to be touched, or that there is no technician so the equipment is not to be handled. So when we talk about exciting classes and student-centred classrooms, online peer collaboration and research, and professional chat rooms, our teachers' despondence tells us that bureaucratic talk and petro dollars haven't made a difference to their professional lives and, consequently, to their students' learning experience.

However, all is not lost. Fortunately, many teachers have special talents, and even dynamic or interesting personalities that would win out against the "machine" any day. I have witnessed a teacher compose a jingle that summarised the main teaching point of a lesson. I have seen a teacher adopt the "play dotish" stance to elicit correct answers from her students. Time and time again I have uncovered the "touch of madness" of the truly creative teacher who, in the classroom setting, becomes the actress on stage or adopts the "other persona," all in an effort to stimulate students' interest and to engage them in meaningful learning.

Observing teachers has convinced me that teacher educators need to place much emphasis on the affective as they work alongside their students. Building trust and mutual respect is fundamental to bringing out the sometimes hidden potential in student teachers. Their willingness to be innovative—to "think outside of the box"—may be dependent on how they perceive the observer.

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