

# Lesson observation: what is the problem it's solving?

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# Lesson observation: what is the problem it's solving?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the problems presented to teachers, school leaders and schools as a result of the neoliberal revolution and marketisation of the English education system following the 1988 Education Act. The policies created have focused on improving standards in schools by improving the quality of teacher efficacy through creating a national framework of Teachers' Standards to measure teachers against. The paper examines how lesson observations are implemented to make judgements on the quality of teaching and improve the academic outcomes of young people. It draws on evidence from relevant literature and integrates my own experience as a headteacher having worked in education for 17 years. The paper analyses the problems represented using Bacchi's (2009) framework, What's the problem represented to be?, underpinned by the work of Foucault. It explores the influence of disciplinary power and governmentality in relation to the impact of lesson observations on teachers and on schools. Finally, this paper outlines the implications for practice and makes recommendations for the future.

## KEYWORDS

LESSON OBSERVATION  
TEACHERS' STANDARDS  
DISCIPLINARY POWER  
GOVERNMENTALITY  
TEACHER EFFICACY

## INTRODUCTION

In countries all over the world the most common method for evaluating the effectiveness of the performance of a teacher and to improve teacher performance, thus leading to increased student outcomes, is to use lesson observations (OECD, 2009).

*'Observational methods are used extensively in teacher education and professional development to describe and evaluate classrooms. Pianta and Hamre (2009) argue that although observation can be a central feature of accountability frameworks, the most important reason to conduct classroom observation is to inform teacher professional development and, subsequently, to know if it is working.'* (RTI International, 2016: 5)

I use Bacchi's (2009) framework for policy analysis, What's the problem represented to be?, This framework integrates Michel Foucault's (1980) concept of power, specifically in relation to disciplinary power exerted by the state, for this context the English government, and how this leads to the governmentality of the education system (Fimyar, 2008). The paper will discuss what the use of lesson observations, what problem it

is attempting to solve and finally how it is not effective in its purpose.

## THEORETICAL FRAME

To analyse the impact of lesson observations on the professional learning of teachers I will apply Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis, 'What's the problem represented to be?'. This framework integrates Foucault's concept of power, not as one person dominating another but "the 'intention' of power as invested in its real and effective practices" (Foucault, 1980f)' (Ettlinger, 2011: 542). The paper will explore sovereign power, the power held by the centralised state, where the people follow the rules and laws imposed on them; 'the conception of power as an original right that is given up in the establishment of sovereignty, and the contract, as matrix of political power, provide its points of articulation' (Foucault, 1980: 91). In the context of lesson observations, sovereign power is being exerted by the government through the Teachers' Standards which as the DfE (2011) states are the minimum requirements for teachers' practice and conduct, therefore to meet these minimum requirements teachers must conform and achieve these minimum standards.

Bacchi's framework is underpinned by three propositions, the first of which is that 'we are governed by problematisations' (Bacchi, 2009). This includes governmentality which 'identifies the relation between the government of the state (politics) and government of the self (morality), the construction of the subject (genealogy of the subject) with the formation of the state (genealogy of the state)' (Lemke, 2000, as cited in Fimyar, 2008: 5). The second proposition is that 'we need to study problematisations' rather than the problem itself (Bacchi, 2009) relating to what Foucault described as 'discursive formations; associated with the human sciences and the professions' (Sawyer, 2002, as cited in Bacchi, 2009: 35). This is the theory that specific discourses or

'truths' are given greater importance as a result of being sanctioned by those that hold the power in an organisation. The third and final proposition is that 'we need to problematise (interrogate) the problematisations on offer through scrutinising the premises and effects of the problem representations they contain' (Bacchi, 2009).

## WHAT'S THE 'PROBLEM' REPRESENTED TO BE?

The neoliberal revolution began with the Education Reform Act of 1988 in England, which facilitated competition between schools through league tables and per capita funding, leading to increased parental choice (Boronski & Hassan, 2015). This triggered a shift in power from the teachers and local authorities to individual schools and central government, particularly through the academisation policy set out in 2010. This marketisation of education with a relentless focus on performance, against a backdrop of the raising standards policy by successive governments from New Labour through to the Conservatives over the last 20 years, has made schools responsible for society's problems. Ball (2012) argues that the paradox here is that, through the policy of granting greater freedom and autonomy to schools as a result of this marketisation of education, new lines of governmentality are created and established.

This increased accountability in education is an example of Foucault's disciplinary power in action. Individual schools must perform well in the league tables and all other performance indicators, which, in turn, can lead to a better Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) rating. To achieve this, the school must get better outcomes; how they achieve this is constructed by the policy set out in the 2010 paper from the Department for Education (DfE), *The importance of teaching: 'setting high standards through the curriculum and qualifications and holding schools accountable for the results they*

achieve will create a powerful driver of improvement' (DfE, 2010: 71).

The intention is to reform the education system in England; to achieve this, schools and teachers must follow this policy. This is all part of the UK government's model of public service reform based on the principle of a self-improving system; specifically for education, it is based on a top-down performance management of teachers, introduction of greater competition between schools and the introduction of greater pressure from citizens through school choice and voice (Ball, 2017). The competition between schools exists as parents and students select the schools that are ranked higher in the league tables based on their performance through data generated through national tests. These schools become more and more successful, leading to greater pressure on the least popular schools to try to survive.

If the school is to achieve higher standards then they must improve the quality of teaching and learning within the school. The political ideology in relation to improved teacher efficacy resides in the policy to 'reprofessionalise' teachers through the DfE (2011) Teachers' Standards. Under the New Labour government, from the late 1990s to 2010, the conception of 'reprofessionalising' teachers created new professional bodies such as the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) and Teacher Training Agency (TTA) which later became the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). Their purpose was to reconstruct the professional knowledge base of a teacher, constructing a framework for teachers from the start of their career to the end of their career following a prescriptive professional development and career progression pathway (Beck, 2009). These Teacher Standards 'have become the disciplinary structure of professionalism and teacher quality against which teachers are measured or examined' (Bourke et al., 2015: 90). The effect of this discourse is

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that it is reductive by insisting that you can only become an effective teacher through following a prescriptive list of knowledge and competencies (Beck, 2009).

The problem of attempting to improve overall standards in education by reprofessionalising teachers in England has led to school leaders and external agencies such as Ofsted imposing lesson observations as a method of improving teacher efficacy. Lesson observations measure a teacher's performance often within a single lesson against the Teacher Standards as a way of requiring and forcing teachers to perform alongside the set criteria. There is no evidence to suggest that this method is working in addressing the problem and raising overall educational standards (EEF, 2017a).

### WHAT EFFECTS ARE PRODUCED BY THIS REPRESENTATION OF THE 'PROBLEM'?

One effect of this neoliberal revolution is performativity, illustrated in the need to measure and make judgements of the individual's productivity in relation to the organisation and its improvement (Ball, 2012). As set out in the Teachers' Standards, it is expected that headteachers should assess teachers' performance against the standards in schools (DfE, 2011: 6). This will be carried out through a performance management cycle, one of the core components of which is carrying out lesson observations of the teacher in the classroom. Observation has come to be used as a means of 'exercising power and control over what teachers do and how their professional worth is evaluated and subsequently valued' (O'Leary, 2016: 2). This is an exertion of disciplinary power. The political power of the Teachers' Standards obeys a model of a contractual exchange; the contractual exchange in our context comes from the government, passing to the leaders in a school and then on to the individual teacher (Foucault, 1980).

There are many different approaches to

lesson observations that are implemented in schools all over the world. In this paper I focus on the top-down approach through performance management cycles within schools often completed by a senior leader or as part of an external agency measuring against the Teacher Standards. As part of the critique, other forms of lesson observations such as a peer-to-peer approach are considered and evaluated, with further recommendations made in the final section.

### HOW AND WHERE HAS THIS REPRESENTATION OF THE 'PROBLEM' BEEN PRODUCED, DISSEMINATED AND DEFENDED?

As a consequence of this disciplinary power in relation to lesson observations, the outcome for those working in schools is governmentality in the English education system. The rationale behind the approach of lesson observations already discussed in the previous sections of this paper demonstrates that teachers and school leaders are governing themselves according to what they consider to be true; they are defined as regimes of practice or government (Fimyar, 2008). An example of neoliberal governmentality in action is the grading of lesson observations; this is where a senior leader in a school watches a teacher in the classroom, often once a year, and makes judgements against criteria such as those from the Ofsted framework, to assess the quality of teaching. O'Leary (2016) argues that lesson observations carried out this way are a policy tool with a single focus on accountability and the improving standards agenda. One of the truths created through disciplinary power which senior leaders self-govern is that through observing a teacher's lesson for just one hour a year they can successfully measure and make conclusions on their overall performance. 'Assessing teaching and learning practices on a tiny fraction of a teacher's annual working hours can only engender superficial judgements

or snapshots of quality at best' (O'Leary, 2016). Having worked in the profession for 17 years, this is the established norm of practice, a fixed narrow view of how lesson observation should be carried out, an established truth that all in school self-govern themselves with.

Another truth is that for senior leaders to make a judgement they must do this against criteria or a framework; as the desired outcome is to measure and improve schools, it makes sense for school leaders to use the latest Ofsted framework for this. The danger here is what O'Leary (2016) describes as a 'normalisation of practice' whereby the teacher understands how the criteria work and adapts their teaching to tick the right boxes during the observation. The teachers are self-governing themselves to conform to this agenda so they fit the criteria and reassure the senior leader of a positive outcome. In 2014 Ofsted attempted to challenge this truth by communicating it would no longer be making a judgement about the quality of a teacher's teaching in its observations during an inspection as part of its inspection framework from September 2014, and then it went further by stating that 'it does not expect schools to use the Ofsted evaluation schedule to grade teaching or individual lessons' (Ofsted, 2018a). However, three years later many schools that I work with are still grading individual lessons. In my own school we made the decision to remove the grades; however, during our observations even without the grades we are still making judgements as senior leaders about teachers through the written text that is recorded and measuring this against a set of standards that links back to the Ofsted framework. This is because as school leaders we are normalised to fulfil the accountability and improving standards agenda and self-govern the regimes of practice.

In my own experience of teaching, and having been observed myself, I believe that lesson observations can help the

professional development of teachers and through critical reflection with other professionals can lead to an improvement in teaching. The paper explores some of these in the next section. However, it is not as simple as just removing the grading of a lesson observation: as already highlighted, an important consideration must be the power that is exerted in the relationship between the observer and the observed (O'Leary, 2016).

A power imbalance exists between a senior leader and a teacher within a school. However, if we were to consider a peer-to-peer approach, this could diminish some of the negative aspects that have been highlighted. For the last three years we have developed a lesson observation system in my own school that works with a triad of three teachers working together as part of a collaboration within the same subject specialism or across different subjects. They have a common interest or focus and carry out a series of peer-to-peer observations; there is no judgement or grade given but a reflective discussion centred on the pedagogical development of their teaching and making potential changes to their practice. This approach is formative and follows a coaching model between two or more professionals, fostering a more collaborative and equal observation process, whereas an observation with a senior leader with the purpose of evaluating a teacher for performance-related pay is interpreted by teachers as high stakes and judgemental (O'Leary, 2016).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

This paper has analysed the impact of lesson observations on the professional learning of teachers by applying Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis, What's the problem represented to be?. The government is striving to improve educational standards in England, and at school level the effect is that schools and school leaders use lesson observations where the focus is on making judgements

on the quality of teaching and learning and attempting to improve the standards achieved. The approach to using lesson observations in this way as a result of the power dynamics does not achieve the desired outcomes. It is essential that new education policies are created informed by further empirical studies to help address this. In this section I will set out some recommendations to help improve future educational practice.

We must be clear what the purpose of lesson observation is; for example as Ofsted (2018b) explains with regard to its use of lesson observations, they produce evidence that makes judgements about both the quality of teaching and the quality of leadership and management within a school. This is said to be 'a fundamental part of inspection that deserves focused attention' (Ofsted, 2018b). Ofsted plays a significant role in establishing these truths within education and, if it was to change the way that it inspects schools, then this could change the way that lesson observations are used nationally. The changes to the new Ofsted framework proposed for September 2019 will move towards this, focusing more on the overall outcomes in a new quality of education judgement (Ofsted, 2019). In my own experience as a headteacher in a large secondary school, the policies and approach to inspections by Ofsted have an influence on the leadership of schools and often a negative impact on a school's culture.

The recommendations for future practice in relation to lesson observations are concentrated on empowering individual teachers to have more ownership of their professional development; however, to achieve this, the culture within the school needs to create the conditions for this to be successful (Attfield, 2010). If school leaders can focus on creating this culture with the support of new policies and, more importantly, increased funding then this could lead to improvements in the quality of teaching and, most importantly, an improvement in the educational

standards of the young people of our country (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2006: 503).

'Lesson study' is a model of teacher-led classroom-based research which originated in Japan and that is beginning to be used in schools in the UK and the US (EEF, 2017b). It is a collaborative approach of three professionals working as a triad focusing on a shared area of development for their students' learning. Together the teachers plan lessons and activities, observe each other and evaluate together to enable improvement; the emphasis is on improving the students' learning rather than how the teaching impacts on the learning (O'Leary, 2016). The advantage of this approach is that the focus is not on judging and measuring the teacher against the Teachers' Standards and there is no power imbalance as it is peer-to-peer; some research concludes that this more collaborative approach can lead to an improvement in teacher efficacy. 'Appraisal and feedback can have a significant impact on classroom instruction, teacher motivation and attitudes, as well as on student outcomes' (Schleicher, 2018: 104). The participation of multiple evaluators in a peer-review process leads to better practice and places importance on those involved needing a high level of pedagogical expertise to ensure a higher quality of critical reflection. This follows a coaching approach to the lesson observation process, which, as O'Leary (2016) illustrates, leads to a different effect compared to the feedback given following a judgemental observation. It is important to note that there is a lack of evidence and research that evaluates the impact of this peer-to-peer approach, and therefore I call for further research to be commissioned by the government to explore the potential benefits of this approach to lesson observations.

I conclude through the discourse of this paper that lesson observations don't lead to an improvement in the quality of teaching. Recent research for the EEF (2017a) found that there was no

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evidence to suggest that using teacher observations improved combined maths and English scores for young people. In a review of educational research for The Sutton Trust, Coe et al. (2014) outlined that any evidence of impact on student outcomes was generally limited. The recommendation would be for evidence to be shared with all schools to highlight that lesson observations don't improve the outcomes of schools and young people; this would encourage all schools to explore other methods such as a peer-

to-peer approach. However, to enable this approach to be considered further, research must be carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of peer-to-peer lesson observation in schools in the UK and we must consider the potential barriers that would exist to adopting this approach, one of which is time. For peer-to-peer programmes of lesson observations the emphasis is on ongoing, regular collaboration, regular observations and regular feedback; all of this takes time and teachers are extremely busy. The issue is

raised by Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2005: 121). 'Undertaking planned learning beyond these days often relies on teachers giving up their own time, in the evenings, at weekends or during the holidays.' Teachers are already under immense pressure and increased workload; the additional time and commitment for this lesson observation approach, even if it leads to solving the actual problem, would have to be resourced. ■

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