

Observing other subjects

Colin Foster questions the value of non-subject-specific judgements

Imagine sitting in on a GP consultation without having any medical knowledge. There are many relevant things you could notice. You might comment on the doctor's bedside manner, use of eye contact, how well they listened to the patient, the clarity of their explanations, their friendliness – all important things. You might ask the patient afterwards what they thought, and find that you both agree that the consultation was excellent. But, because you are not medically knowledgeable you missed noticing that the GP prescribed completely the wrong medicine, which would make the patient worse, not better.

For me this imaginary situation parallels some of the difficulties I see with lesson observations when they are carried out by people who readily admit that they have little knowledge of the subject in question. These could be senior leaders in school or inspectors, for instance. One way in which the value of such observations is defended is in terms of the observer's willingness to see the lesson from a child's perspective.¹ However, although children's views on their lessons are important, there are some things that a learner is in a very poor position to evaluate – for example, how well they are being prepared for future learning experiences in the subject, whether the teacher is inadvertently reinforcing misconceptions, or whether there are more effective ways to teach the topic in question that they are simply unaware of. The patient whose medicine makes them more poorly might defend their GP by saying that it isn't their fault – their illness is probably hard to treat. Only another doctor would be in a position to say that their illness is actually very easy to treat – they just didn't get the opportunity to experience a good treatment.

When lesson observations are carried out by non-subject specialists, comments like "good discussion" or "pupils were very engaged" are easy to make. But, a classroom discussion should not be an end in itself. It can be quite easy to generate lively discussions which leave the participants little the wiser. Similarly, the value of pupils being engaged in tasks depends entirely on how worthwhile the task is, how it is used, how it connects with other tasks, and what the teacher intends the learners to gain from it. The observer may claim good knowledge of "generic teaching skills" such as behaviour management, which is an area that many teachers want help with, but there are dangers in addressing

behaviour in isolation from the subject matter. Problematic behaviour in mathematics lessons often has something to do with the mathematical task that the learners have been given or the way in which the task is being managed. The first question to ask when learners are avoiding "the work" is: Is "the work" worth doing? Perhaps the learners have a point? If you serve a child some food and they refuse to eat it, or spit it out, wouldn't you first check that the food is OK and not, for example, too hot, before you try to make them eat it regardless? Non-subject-specific behaviour management often starts from the assumption that the work is probably boring and we should expect that the majority of the learners will probably not want to do it. Nevertheless the learners have to do it, and we just have to find some way to get them to do so, as painlessly as possible. In this way the conversation is likely to move straight into the teacher being clear about their expectations and possible uses of rewards and sanctions, when perhaps a better task (or better deployment of the task) would avoid some of these problems.

I am sure that I have learned a great deal over the years from watching lessons in other subject areas. It can be fascinating to see the same children you teach being taught a different subject by a colleague. It can be very thought-provoking to consider how an approach you see in another subject area might be adopted or adapted for use in a mathematics lesson, or how you might co-teach a lesson or sequence of lessons with a colleague from another subject area. But, I think it would be wrong to pretend that I am equipped to make judgements on a lesson when I do not have the relevant subject-specific content knowledge – let alone the pedagogical content knowledge. I might think that I can, but I might simply be ignorant of what is important in that subject area and what good ways of achieving those things might be.



Note

1. This does raise the question why we are bothering with the observer when we could just ask some of the children!

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