

Informal Observation as Professional Development

By Winton Clarence

As we undertake the task of disseminating the Pacific Regional Educational Laboratory's (REL's) Pacific Early Literacy Resource Toolkit (PELRT) (see back cover), we have been rewarded by the many experiences we have had with teachers. The unique professional development (PD) training strategy we share at these sessions—informal observation—is perceived by teachers as an exciting new way of professional learning.

One big idea from the PELRT that is used in our training sessions is the Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC). Extending teachers' understanding and practice of this cycle depends on deepening their skill in the four big ideas that make up the TLC: assessing, reflecting, planning, and teaching. With time constraints on training, we chose to focus our PD efforts on

assessment—especially the three pillars of assessment (i.e., observation, performance, conversation). Just as we ask teachers to engage in formative assessment by observing the students in their classrooms to identify changing strengths and needs in early literacy, we use a similar approach with the teachers themselves.

In an informal observation, I watch teachers teaching early literacy. The teachers understand that there is a follow-up in their classrooms after the presentation of the TLC. This includes a post conference after we have worked together in the classroom. At the training, teachers learn that during the informal observation, I will take notes organized in six parts: observation notes; conversation notes; performance notes; and notes on strengths, needs, and suggestions. With these notes, I am able to conduct

the post conference immediately after my observation, if the teacher's schedule allows.

Teachers are accustomed to being told what to do. This informal observation is different, because instead of being told what to do, teachers are being asked about what they do and think. They are being led to become reflective teachers. Teachers tell me this is a new approach. When they are asked to reflect on their lessons, it takes a while for them to respond, as they are not used to reflecting. However, when asked at the end how they feel about the process, most responded by saying, "This is a great learning experience. We just hope it will be done on a regular basis."

In short, PD is perceived as a trainer conducting a workshop with a group; informal observation is not seen as PD. As a result of this supportive effort, teachers feel comfortable and happy as they engage in conversations during the post conference that help them think about their strengths and the areas they can improve in their teaching.

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