

# Aspiring School leaders' Perceptions of the Walkthrough Observations

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



**Ruben Garza**

*Texas State University*

**Martha Ovando**

*University of Texas at Austin*

**Ann O'Doherty**

*University of Washington*

*The accountability pressures of the recent decade require that instructional leaders work with teachers to ensure student academic success. The “walkthrough” or “walkthrough observation” is an instructional leadership practice that has been regarded as a promising avenue to collaboratively work with teachers. This exploratory study examines aspiring instructional leaders’ perceptions regarding the walkthrough observation. Findings indicate that this type of practice is perceived as a Bureaucratic Approach, incorporating a one-way transmission of feedback from the principal to the observed teacher, or as a Collaborative Approach, including teachers in conducting observations and actively participating in the collection of walkthrough data. Additionally, findings suggest that regardless of the perceived approach, a walkthrough observation may be considered an authentic feedback data source.*

An instructional leadership practice that has become prominent as a promising avenue to collect data for enhancing teaching and learning, is known as the “walkthrough” or “walkthrough observation,” and “learning walks.” These walkthroughs, conducted predominantly by school administrators, focus on instruction and center on improvement of the school or staff (Cudeiro & Nelson, 2009) and may vary in nature and process. For example, Calvin, Flannery, Sugai, and Monegan (2009) conducted ten minute observations, provided teachers with feedback regarding their performance, and collaboratively developed an action plan to improve instructional approaches. Similarly, Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, and Poston, (2004) developed a very brief observation protocol for more proficient teachers to foster professional growth through reflective dialogue. However, a lack of agreement appears to exist as researchers and practitioners continue to assign different meaning to this practice, also known as “informal observations, pop-ins, walk-ins, or drop-ins” (Zepeda, 2005, p.18). Other definitions include the following: “learning walks, instructional walks, focus walks, walk-about, data walks, data snaps, learning visits, quick visits, mini-observations, rounds, instructionally focused walkthroughs, administrative walkthroughs, supervisory walkthroughs, collegial walkthroughs, reflective walkthroughs, classroom walkthroughs, and just walkthroughs” (Kachur, Stout, & Edwards, 2010, p. 1). Although there exists a variation in the meaning of the tool used for observation purposes, the end result is to gather evidence of teaching and student learning to inform actions that will guide improvement. However, limited research examines walkthrough observations from a teacher perspective regarding their use in a collaborative process (Bushman, 2006; Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002). Recently, researchers have attempted “to ascertain perceptions of the usefulness of classroom observations as a means of individual professional growth” for teachers (Topolka-Jorissen & Allen, 2009, p. 5). In addition, teachers’ voices appear to be absent from the discourse, and therefore, it is critical to highlight their perspectives in order to promote teacher active participation in enhancing their instructional practice (Bushman, 2006).

This paper highlights the findings of an exploratory study aimed at illuminating the perceptions of aspiring instructional leaders regarding the walkthrough observation and its actual potential. Thus, the following includes the theoretical background, methodological considerations, findings, and implications.

### **Theoretical Background**

This study is guided by the literature on walkthroughs. For the purpose of this exploratory study, the term walkthrough observation refers to a “series of brief classroom observations” (Ovando, 2001, p. 223). Principals, teacher leaders, mentors, coaches and other administrators may conduct these observations. According to Zepeda, walkthrough observations share the following features: “1) They are brief, lasting approximately 15 to 20 minutes (perhaps longer), 2) They can occur at the beginning, middle, or end of a period, and 3) They can occur at any time during the school year” (Zepeda, 2005, p. 18). Further, these observations are recognized by teachers “as an effective way to focus on real teaching episodes, teachers’ instructional performance, student learning and teachers’ individual needs” (Ovando, 2001, p. 223). The most proficient teachers expect feedback from the campus instructional leader as a way to develop and grow professionally (Colasacco, 2010).

## **Walkthrough Protocols**

Given the apparent utility of walkthrough observations, school leaders have been engaged in conducting these observations (Downey et al., 2004) to collect information related to actual classroom instruction. Others report that some school districts “require that principals do a specific number of walkthroughs or “five-by-fives” (visits to five classrooms for five minutes) each week” (Topolka-Jorissen & Allen, 2009, p. 3). At the same time, teachers are encouraged to get involved in the walkthrough observation process and to become partners in a dialogue based on these observations (Bushman, 2006). Regular discussions can influence teacher reflection and empower teachers to foster their own professional growth (Shortland, 2010). As result, the classroom walkthrough observation is viewed as a suitable mechanism to collect classroom-based data to help teachers enhance instruction (Topolka-Jorissen & Allen, 2009).

Similarly, novice principals value a walkthrough observation, as an effective collaborative instructional leadership practice to facilitate effective student learning. For instance, walkthrough observations may “include brief routine peer or administrator observations of classroom instruction with feedback combined with reflections on personal practice” (Ovando & O’Doherty, 2010, p. 15). Others note that “to make informal classroom observations a priority, principals must frame their work habits and daily routines around dropping by classrooms and then following up by providing teachers with feedback and opportunities for reflection and inquiry” (Zepeda, 2005, pp. 1-2). Similarly, first-year principals “conduct walk-through observations which allow them to briefly visit classroom on a more frequent basis, offering feedback intended to acknowledge effective teaching and assist teachers’ efforts to enhance instruction as a well as collaborating with teachers and instructional coaches in the walk-through process” (Ovando & O’Doherty, 2010, p. 25). By conducting frequent classroom observations, principals may also get to know students better and develop a real understanding of what students are actually learning (Holland, n/d). However, many administrators view walkthroughs as time consuming and choose not to use, while prioritizing other administrative tasks (Granada & Vriesenga, 2008).

## **Walkthroughs and Outcomes**

Moreover, a walkthrough observation may serve several purposes. For instance, previous research suggests that conducting walkthroughs may increase leadership capacity (Moss & Brookhart, 2013) to heighten leadership visibility on campus (Fisher, 2013), to become familiar with the daily activity in a classroom (Kachur, Stout, & Edwards, 2010), and “to focus on real teaching episodes, teachers’ instructional performance, students learning and teachers’ individual needs” (Ovando, 2001, p. 223). Others use walkthroughs as an opportunity to develop and to discuss agenda items with faculty, to help faculty focus on ways to contribute to school-wide success (Kachur et al., 2010) or gather data to improve student success and lower the drop-out rates (Ziegler, (2006).

While a walkthrough observation may lead to instruction-focused conversations between instructional leaders and teachers (O’Doherty & Ovando, 2013), the appropriate duration of sufficient data collection remains unclear. For instance, Downey et al. (2005) advanced the Downey Informal Observation approach which requires that principals observe classrooms from three to five minutes. As a result the “three-minute classroom walk-through” has become a common classroom assessment practice (Downey et. al, 2005). Ginsberg and Murphy (2002)

agree that “these frequent, short, unscheduled visits can foster focused, reflective, and collaborative adult learning” (p. 34). This may be viewed as an organized and quick approach to collect sufficient (David, 2008). However, such short observations may not be an effective practice. As Zepeda (2005) asserts, “the egg-timer approach to classroom observations of this duration is a “blitz” in which the observation’s brevity minimizes data collection” (p. 19). Others suggest that teachers themselves may conduct a walk-through observation. Thus, this observation “is unique because it does focus on enabling teachers to learn by exploring and relating to what the teachers are doing in their classrooms” (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p. 121). As Sullivan and Glanz (2005) acknowledge, the “standards-based walkthrough focus is on enabling you to learn by exploring and relating to what other teachers are doing in their classrooms. Because it is designed and carried out by you, it helps to develop your leadership capacity” (pp. 136-137). Further, according to teachers, it is a process that “encouraged teachers to reflect and share” (Bushman, 2006, p. 58). This collaborative sharing session is a way to enable both parties to compare, to provide, and to receive evidence of the classroom activity (Shortland, 2010).

### **Perspectives Regarding Walkthroughs**

While walkthroughs may assess teacher performance through a supervisory lens rather than an evaluative one (Range, Scherz, Holt & Young, 2011), principals may also adopt bureaucratic methods when conducting walkthroughs (Minnear-Peplinski, (2009). In spite of these approaches, research exploring principals’ perceptions of walkthroughs is limited. In one example, Keruskin (2005) examined high school principals’ perceptions about the impact of walkthroughs on student achievement. Findings suggested that the use of walkthroughs can promote change in the culture of the school and classrooms through collaboration between the teacher and the principal positively impacting instruction and student achievement. In a similar study (Rossi, 2007) of elementary school principals’ conceptions, findings indicated that walkthroughs promoted an improvement in test scores, teachers implemented more focused instructional strategies and improved their practice, students were more engaged and produced better work, and teacher/principal dialogue regarding teaching and student learning increased.

In another study, Dixon-Houston (2012) examined principals’ and teachers’ perspectives regarding the collegial aspect of walkthroughs. While administrators identified trust, positive relationships, common goals, modeling, transparency, and a culture for learning as aspects of promoting collegiality through walkthroughs, teachers reported that trust between both parties, and feedback and reflection are key in promoting a collegial relationship to enhance teaching and increase dialogue with the administrator. Overall, “all agreed that walkthroughs should be collegial in an effort to improve teacher pedagogy, classroom management, and student achievement” (p 67). Administrators and teachers viewed the walkthrough as an effective approach to supervision, however teachers agreed that it should be at least 25 minutes long.

Although some teachers may perceive walkthroughs as ineffective as a result of unclear expectations, lack of transparency, or concern about their teaching performance, Brown and Coley (2011) explored the use of walkthroughs as a means to improve administrators’ instructional leadership and reflective conversations about teaching performance with teachers. Results indicated that the frequency of walkthroughs promoted trust between administrator and teacher; thus, an administrator needs to have a more intimate connection teaching and learning to improve instruction on the school campus. Teachers also need to participate in ongoing critical reflection about their teaching performance to improve their skill that will benefit students.

Given such divergent perspectives regarding walkthrough observations, it is important to highlight walkthrough observations' potential for collaborative work with teachers to enhance instruction and student learning. As Topolka-Jorissen and Allen (2009) suggested, there is a need "for further exploration of supervisory artifacts and their potential as a collaborative process that might strengthen school capacity and student learning, as well as the need for additional research on the utility of learning walks as a capacity-building strategy" (p. 16). This also means that trust and transparency must be established for collaboration to be effective (David, 2008). The literature offers an account about some of the benefits of walk through observations (Ovando, 2001); however, questions regarding actual practice remain and merit attention. For example, How do teachers and principals define the walkthrough observation? What do they see as benefits or limitations? How should walkthrough observations be conducted? Who should conduct these observations, and for what purpose?

### **Methodological Considerations**

This exploratory study focused on aspiring instructional leaders' perceptions regarding the potential of walkthrough observations. Exploratory qualitative studies are appropriate "to investigate little understood phenomenon, to identify or discover important categories of meaning, to generate hypothesis of future research" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 96). Thus, we were interested in educators' perceptions about walkthroughs since the critical nature of observations continues to be illuminated as an effective practice (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). The following questions guided this study:

- 1) What are aspiring instructional leaders' overall perceptions of the walkthrough observation?
- 2) What are aspiring instructional leaders' perceptions about the potential of walkthrough observations?

We employed a qualitative descriptive research approach with an open-ended questionnaire as a single data collection source. The intent was to capture respondents' views related to the walkthrough observation. As Leedy and Ormrod (2005) remind us, "the researcher who conducts a descriptive study wants to determine the nature of how things are" (p. 198).

### **Participants**

Given the main aim of the study, convenience sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) was used to invite teachers enrolled in, or recent graduates of, an educational administration principal preparation program in a major southwestern university. These participants were readily available and their authentic experiences were conducive to providing rich data to address the research questions of this study, thereby illuminating participants' voices regarding walkthroughs. From a total 59 invited participants, 33 began the survey and 22 responded to all questions and returned the completed questionnaires for a 37% response rate. The majority (72%) of the participants were currently enrolled at one of two sites of a principal preparation program and only 4 of the participants (18%) were recent graduates. All were certified as teachers and had at least two years of teaching experience in elementary, middle school, or high school. Over half of the participants were still classroom teachers at the time of the study and three self-identified as instructional coaches. An instructional coach in this study refers to a full time classroom teacher who also works with other teachers to provide instructional support

towards improving classroom instruction. Six participants self-identified as assistant principals; however, since this was their first assistant principal assignment at the time of this study, we considered them aspiring instructional teachers. Table 1 shows a description of the participants.

Table 1  
*Description of Participants (N = 22)*

Current Position	n	%
Classroom Teacher	13	59%
Instructional Coach	3	14%
Assistant Principal	6	27%
Total	22	100%

### **Data Collection**

An open-ended format was used to capture participants' insights, expressed in their own words without attempting to influence their thinking (Patton, 1990). The questionnaire was developed and initially field tested and validated over a period of three years (2010 – 2012) with principalship graduate students who shared a similar professional background with this study's respondents. The questionnaire included open-ended questions related to the nature, purpose, benefits, challenges and utility of the walkthrough observation. The final electronic questionnaire was uploaded to Qualtrics™ and mailed as a web-based link with information on the study including a request for participation. Participants were asked to identify entry cohort year membership, role served during the time of the study, and to respond to nine open-ended questions.

### **Data analysis**

While the Qualtrics™ software allowed for responses to be analyzed separately by cohort year and position served, due to the small number of participants and the risk of revealing the identity of participants, we chose to report the findings only as aggregates. The data analysis was completed according to the two areas of focus. For the first one, teachers' perception of the walkthrough observation, analysis took place at two levels, primary and secondary analysis. The primary analysis aimed at identifying emerging themes related to the first research question guiding the study, and the secondary analysis sought to discern patterns within the primary analysis findings.

The primary analysis began when participants' completed questionnaires containing written responses were received. These responses were analyzed using an inductive process to identify and organize themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Independently, we conducted initial data analysis before meeting to discuss preliminary themes. Two of us conducted an initial analysis through hand coding of printed results and the other co-author employed HyperResearch® Qualitative Analysis Tool Version 2.8 to conduct initial coding.

Once the initial coding was concluded, we conferred on the emerging findings for comparative purposes and addressed differences. During the comparative analysis and discussions of the findings, two patterns within the participants' responses surfaced, and as a

result, the researchers conducted a secondary analysis to further explore the patterns and to determine if any meaning could be attributed. Finally, we completed the aforementioned steps to analyze the data related to the potential of the walkthrough observation following an independent inductive process. The following is a summary of the findings.

### Findings

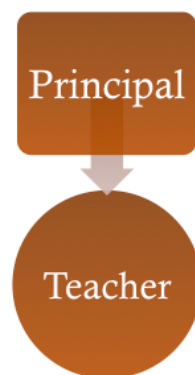
Our findings are described according to the two emerging major patterns, including the potential of a walkthrough observation.

#### Emergence of Two Approaches for Walkthrough Observations

As we analyzed the data, we noticed differences in the participants' responses related to the purpose of the observer(s), how feedback from the walkthrough observations was transmitted, the purpose of the feedback, and positions of power either stated or implied. As a result, two distinct approaches emerged to convey participants' overall perceptions about the walkthrough observation. Figure 1 shows the two approaches used in conducting a walkthrough observation.

#### Two Approaches of Walkthrough Observations

Bureaucratic Approach



Collaborative Approach

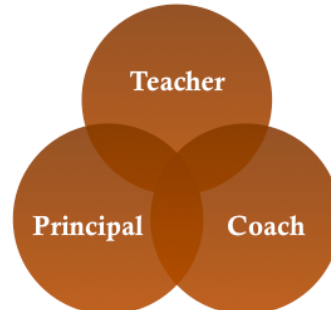


Figure 1

**The Bureaucratic Approach.** The bureaucratic approach reflects a hierarchical structure based on the assumption that principals are the only ones who have the expertise and direct authority to conduct classroom observations and to offer recommendations to improve teacher's instructional performance. Although participants stressed the role of the principal, this approach could also include others (e.g. assistant principals, instructional coaches) but in the same authoritative role, directly observing and monitoring instruction, evaluating what was observed and providing critical and/or constructive feedback to the teacher being observed.

Participants also embraced the idea that an unannounced or unscheduled nature of a walkthrough was the best mechanism to capture a true picture of what happens in a classroom.

As one participant expressed: “Walk-throughs are one of the only authentic ways to monitor and supervise teachers.” Though there was general agreement to the length and frequency of walkthrough observations, some participants assigned this process to one individual, as acknowledged by the following comment:

It is a period of time, about 10-15 minutes, in which an administrator comes into the classroom un-announced. The administrator takes a running record of conversations/observation behaviors on both the part of the teacher and student. The administrator presents thoughtful questions at the end, [to] further the teachers’ thinking.

Another participant added: “Walkthrough observations offer teachers immediate feedback so they can grow as learners as well. The observation can also help teachers reflect on their instructional techniques and practices.” The data suggested that providing feedback by the administrator to the teacher in written or oral form in a formal conference setting is a critical component of the walkthrough observation process and can be offered directly. However, data also suggested that using a bureaucratic approach contributed to an inconsistency in the delivery of post-observation feedback. For example, a participant acknowledged: “Some teachers get detailed feedback. Some teachers have a conference with the administrator conducting the walk-through. Some teachers never hear anything.”

On the other hand, others indicated that feedback was actually not shared or not made explicit: “The observer has the knowledge of what is going on, but does not provide immediate feedback. The information is sometimes used to make goals for the Campus, but this is usually not communicated to the staff.”

In this approach, the participants identified frequency of walkthroughs, time to conduct the walkthroughs, consistency of feedback, lack of congruence between the stated purpose and actual use of a walkthrough, and teachers’ misunderstanding of the walkthrough as negatively impacting the validity and usefulness of walkthrough observations. As a participant explained:

If an appraiser does not find the time to observe the teachers, and they do not do it often enough, then the feedback may not be valued. Feedback may also serve [no] benefit because in order to see growth, it is critical to be knowledgeable of the classroom over time in order to offer meaningful feedback they will be supportive in growing teachers.

These negative experiences can be attributed to the dissonance between the stated and intended purpose of a walkthrough observation. “Administrators do not conduct enough walkthroughs to get holistic view of each teacher... Administrators are using the data not just for data collection but rather for evaluative purposes,” explained another participant. This intended use of walkthroughs by an administrator may contribute to the mistrust and invalid nature of a walkthrough observation.

Furthermore, teachers’ views of a walkthrough observation as a bureaucratic approach also may negatively impact their experiences as noted by a participant.

The challenges to walkthroughs are making them a priority in a busy schedule and getting teachers to understand what it is going on in their rooms. Teachers’ perceptions often are on the side of feeling that we are “getting” them or that we cannot get a true picture of their classroom. We are not out to get them on a walkthrough, but are assessing the climate and practices. From these we can decide if we need to see more and how soon support is needed in the classroom.

More important, it appears that the purpose, process, and scope of a walkthrough observation through clear and consistent communication is necessary to realize its potential as a way to enhance instructional and influence student learning and success. As a participant affirmed,



The purpose of the walkthrough needs to be communicated to teachers. On the observation form there should also be kind of disclosure mentioned stating that the administration knows that it was only a short amount of time that they were in the room and only so much can be observed at that time, it is impossible to see everything.

Participants' comments illustrate the authority centered in an administrator, and others serving in a direct bureaucratic role, who is solely responsible for providing the teacher with observation information in addition to reflective questions regarding teacher effectiveness. The teacher then, after passively receiving the information, is expected to follow directives, and/or engage in recommended professional development. In the Bureaucratic Approach both the areas of growth and support are not developed through active engagement with the teacher. In other words, the teacher's voice is excluded in identifying areas for growth and development.

**Collaborative Approach.** In contrast with the Bureaucratic approach, a collaborative approach includes distributed power reflected through active engagement of shared responsibility and accountability among team members. Along with the principal, other administrators, teachers, and instructional coaches may be included as members of a walkthrough team with the intent of working jointly towards a common purpose of enhancing classroom instruction.

While some participants defined the walkthrough observation as "un-announced, informal, ongoing, or frequent," others embraced the idea of a collaborative process that involved their colleagues. As a participant expressed:

A walkthrough observation is a short glimpse, usually about 5-20 minutes of a classroom. Traditionally, these observations have been performed by administration to help gauge the effectiveness of instruction on their campuses and as a monitoring tool. Walkthroughs hold promise in peer supervision as well when faculties use them to observe each other teaching in a learning situation.

Further, in the collaborative approach, a peer or a walkthrough observation team may not only conduct a walkthrough observation but more importantly, deliver the post observation feedback. One participant noted,

If it is a peer visit, the teachers meet directly after the walk-through to discuss and reflect on what was observed. At my campus we just committed to looking through our teachers reflections forms on a consistent and weekly basis to help guide our instructional Thursdays (job-embedded professional development) plan. This will help the leadership team discuss our own walk-through observations as well, we will use the same reflection/observation sheet as our teachers do.

According to participants' views, the data gathered collectively is also used to identify campus-wide patterns and practices for professional development purposes for individuals, teams, grade levels, and/or departments. For example, a participant explained:

The data is collected, scored, and analyzed. It may then be shared with faculty or used by administration in determining what areas to focus on for staff development, supervision etc. The raw data may also be given to groups of teachers to analyze for their own use and development.

Rather than passively receiving feedback, teachers were described as active members who generated, analyzed, reflected, and acted on walkthrough observation data. These comments reflect the power of collaboration when there is a clear purpose and intended outcome of a walkthrough observation. "Communicate clear expectations to the observation or appraisal team and to the teachers who are being observed," expressed a participant.

However, a clear purpose may not always be effective if the observer does not have the adequate knowledge and skills to conduct a walkthrough observation and to create and to deliver constructive feedback resulting from this process. In this approach, it is critical to build the capacity of all observers in order to strengthen the credibility of a classroom observation. As a participant explained:

Provide training to all those intending to conduct walk-throughs about how to provide feedback and use standard forms. Ensure all administrators are following similar procedures. Only go in pairs or no more than three people at once when entering a classroom.

Another participant stated, "It is important for peers and supervisors to perform walkthroughs. We all can learn so much from one another. Making time to guide novice teachers through walk through observations is necessary." This shared accountability reflects the power of a walkthrough observation when the process is embraced as a learning opportunity.

Data suggested that building transparent interactions and professional relationships to create a culture of trust is necessary to improve the process of walkthrough observations as a collaborative endeavor. "Build a culture of collaboration and trust would address the perception piece. Being a campus leader is all about establishing relationships and it will take time to build that relationship with your staff," commented a participant. This may lead to a true collaborative organizational culture that recognizes walkthrough observations as a vehicle to promote classroom-based reflective conversations, and to promote mutual respect and support among all stakeholders.

Others stressed the value of peer-collected walkthrough observation data to guide teachers' instructional improvement while protecting the teachers' identity and uphold professional confidentiality. A participant explained:

Names are not put on the form. We then proceed to the next room. Generally, we try to do an entire grade level while they are conducting the same lesson. We share the data back to the office. We don't use names but code the data sheets so we are calibrating at the same time... Data is shared at staff development and analyzed and used for future staff development, curriculum planning, PBIS topics, etc.

Although the ultimate purpose of a walkthrough observation is to collect classroom data to effect instructional change towards enhancing teaching and learning, our findings suggest that two approaches are used to achieve this goal: Bureaucratic and Collaborative may dictate how these observations are actually conducted. While the Bureaucratic approach is a one-way transmission of information, the Collaborative approach provides teachers with an opportunity to play an active role along with administrators in collecting, analyzing, reflecting, and making joint decisions to introduce instructional modifications.

Our findings also revealed that the true potential of a walkthrough observation, regardless of the two emergent approaches, is to serve as a genuine feedback data source and may be the most accurate source of classroom-based information. As a participant observed, "walkthroughs are one of the only authentic ways to monitor and supervise teachers." Another one stated, "The benefits of walkthrough observations are that the observer can get a general feeling of the classroom. They can take the classroom temperature and then asses what kind of support is needed to promote teacher growth and student achievement."

As a data source, a walkthrough observation provides evidence of real instructional practice in order to offer constructive feedback to teachers and used to inform decisions regarding the appropriate assistance needed for improvement. In a participant view a

“walkthrough observations offer teachers immediate feedback so they can grow as a learner as well. The observation can also help teachers reflect on their instructional techniques and practices.” Another added, “once the walkthrough observation is complete, teachers receive feedback from the appraiser during the post-observation conference.”

Data also revealed that there are variations in the consistency and delivery of post-walkthrough observation feedback. For instance, according to a participant,

It [feedback] varies....Once per semester, groups of teachers (often teams or departments) are given summaries from walkthroughs to discuss the data, but often times, the teachers have no idea what they are to do with the data they have been given.

This suggests that the variation might be due to the two approaches that surfaced, bureaucratic and collaborative. While variations in the delivery of feedback based on a walkthrough observation data emerged, the end result is to gather evidence of teaching and student learning to inform and improve instructional practice through constructive feedback.

## **Discussion**

In recent years, the “walkthrough observation” has become prominent as an instructional leadership practice that may involve principals and teachers in a collaborative processes to observe, analyze, and determine the appropriateness of instructional practices. Research suggests that walkthrough observations are important classroom observation tools (Zepeda, 2005), may be used by administrators to promote effective instruction and student success (Ovando & Ramirez, 2007), and may include teachers as partners in conducting walk-through observations (Bushman, 2006). While the walkthrough observation is promising, debates about its purpose and practice limit its true potential. Further, few studies have examined the walkthrough observation as a mechanism for instructional improvement and teacher capacity building from a teacher perspective (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002; Topolka-Jorissen & Allen, 2009). Thus, this exploratory study focused on aspiring instructional leaders’ perceptions regarding walkthrough observations.

Our findings suggest that a walkthrough observation is conceptualized as a vehicle to gather classroom-based data about teachers’ instructional performance with a diagnostic purpose to guide professional growth. This reinforces the notion that teachers’ instructional practice must be authentically examined as a first step to improve their instruction (Zepeda, 2006). However, our findings suggest that teachers’ perceptions about who conducts the walkthrough, the length and frequency of the walkthrough, and the manner with which feedback is provided after the walkthrough, vary. The sporadic occurrence of a walkthrough observation limited the actual benefit associated with someone observing classroom instruction, which in turn reduced the continuity of assistance provided. Given the daily work expectations and unanticipated challenges facing an administrator, difficulty in actually scheduling and completing ongoing walkthrough observations added to the infrequency of the process. As result, two distinctive approaches surfaced from the data, Bureaucratic and Collaborative.

### **Bureaucratic Approach**

The Bureaucratic Approach suggests a hierarchal model to instructional leadership practice. In this approach, participants described the principal, or other designated administrators, as the person(s) who would observe, analyze, compose feedback and dictate what happens as a result of the walkthrough observation. The teacher, on the other hand, is described as a passive recipient

of the externally derived wisdom from the leader, implying that power, and instructional knowledge are centered in the leader. The leader is responsible for collecting information about teaching and the teacher is accountable for making the necessary changes. This echoes the notion that principals have the authority to “provide teachers with prescriptions for what, when and how to teach, and for governing other aspects of their school lives. These are provided in the form of expectations” (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007, p. 27).

Further, the Bureaucratic Approach uncovered in this study shares attributes with bureaucratic authority as described by Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007). They propose “bureaucratic authority relies heavily on hierarchy, rules and regulations, mandates and clearly communicated role expectations” (p. 27). They further posit that “hierarchy equals expertise; thus, supervisors know more about everything than do ordinary teachers” (p. 27). The Bureaucratic Approach is also congruent with original conceptions of instructional leadership. As Marks and Printy (2003) reported, “Instructional leadership, developed during the effective schools movement of the 1980s, viewed the principal as the primary source of educational expertise” (p. 372). It has also been found that given the multitude of responsibilities and ever expanding duties of principals, they do not engage in frequent walkthrough observations, which in turn becomes a drawback as reported by recent research on administrators’ perspective highlighting that principals tend to neglect classroom observations (Granada & Vriesenga, 2008).

### **Collaborative Approach**

In stark contrast to the Bureaucratic Approach, the Collaborative Approach supports power distribution between the principal and teachers, shared responsibility for conducting walkthrough observations and analyzing the data, and determining professional development. The Collaborative Approach reflects professional authority which “presumes that the expertise of teachers counts, and if this expertise is fully developed, counts the most” (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2007 p. 31). Rather than merely subordinate to the formal supervisor, in systems that rely on professional authority, teachers “are *superordinate* to the knowledge base that supports their practice” (p. 31). Further, professional authority supervisory practice “seeks to promote a dialogue among teachers that makes explicit professional values and accepted tenets of practice” (p. 32).

In addition, the Collaborative Approach closely approximates that of shared instructional leadership. Marks and Printy (2003) describe shared instructional leadership as the active collaboration between the principal and teachers on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Within this model, the principal seeks out the ideas, insights, and expertise of teachers in these areas and works alongside teachers for school improvement. The principal and teachers share responsibility for staff development, curricular development, and supervision of instructional tasks (p. 371).

On the other hand, our findings also suggest that a collaborative approach holds great promise to enhance teaching and student learning, in concert with previous research (Kerusing, 2005; Rossi, 2007). Thus, it can be a genuine source of feedback based on actual teaching episodes. A walkthrough observation provides evidence of real instructional practice in order to offer constructive feedback to teachers and used to inform decisions regarding the appropriate assistance needed for improvement. As others note, an actual observation focuses on ‘what the teacher actually says and does, how students react and what actually occurs during a specific teaching episode...’ (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007, p. 239). This is one of the reasons why

teachers appreciate feedback based on classroom observations and the possibilities for professional dialogue (Ovando, 2005; Range et. al, 2011). However, depending on the relationship between a teacher and an administrator, the feedback may be interpreted as “critical, evaluative, judgmental, threatening, or personal,” thus impeding true teacher growth (Shortland, 2010, p. 302).

Furthermore, the use of walkthroughs to collect and to analyze classroom-based data to provide feedback to teachers is congruent with the expectation that instructional leaders are in a key position to “analyze instruction and student learning through regular classroom observations and provide detailed feedback to teachers that supports instructional improvement” (U.S. Department of Education Office on Innovation and Improvement, 2004, p. 11). However, divergent views emerged regarding the actual delivery of feedback, based on walkthrough observations, whether feedback is best delivered to individual teachers, or if walkthrough observation data should be collected by teachers. These differences in perceptions may be attributed to individual preferences, leadership styles, training and available resources. As others affirm, both novice and experienced principals and teachers may benefit from learning together and getting feedback about their own ability to conduct observations and writing reports (Ribas, 2001). Thus, building capacity for teachers and instructional leaders to conduct walkthrough observations, analyze, interpret data, prepare reports, and deliver both written and verbal feedback, is imperative to achieve excellence in teaching and learning (Marks & Printy, 2003; Jorissen & Sundstrom, 2009; and Sergiovanni, Starratt & Cho, 2014).

In summary, the resulting classroom-based data from a walkthrough observation can be employed for at least three purposes. First, for formative assessment as a way to guide teachers’ instructional changes to better address students’ academic needs. Formative assessment, regarding student learning, can inform decisions about professional development for the individual teacher (Stronge, 2006). Moreover, the use of classroom data for formative purposes can go beyond the work with students. As recent researchers affirm “with appropriate data, teachers might redesign lesson plans, create student work groups, or better determine how to involve parents and support staff” (Sergiovanni, Starratt & Cho, 2014, p. 29).

Second, the data collected from a walkthrough observation may guide both teacher’s self-reflection on action and guided reflection. This is in concert with other research that highlights how teacher reflective practice can result from the process (Downey et al, 2004; Shortland, 2010). Further, reflection on action promotes teacher’s deliberate thinking of previous teaching activities. It “involves a post hoc, conscious replay of an activity or event from practice” (Ariasian & Gullickson, 2006, p. 192). On the other hand, guided reflection is collaborative in nature, as it encourages “amplifying the meaning of ones work through the insight of others. Commitment to modifications, plans and experimentation; and documenting learning and providing a rich base of shared knowledge” (Costa & Kallick, 2000, p. 60).

Third, the data from a walkthrough observation may serve as a lens for peer assessment in which teachers themselves gather and interpret classroom-based data as in the collaborative approach. Thus, groups of teachers may be able to “observe, reflect, and discuss their practices and to focus on individual, collegial, and school-wide (sic) improvement (Kachur, Stout & Edwards, 2013, p. 2). In a peer supported process “teachers can informally discuss problems they face, share ideas, help one another in preparing lessons, exchange tips and provide each other support to one another” (Sergionani & Starratt, 2007, p. 263). By working together, teachers act as “walkthrough partners” (Bushman, 2006) and empowered and trusting relationships may develop through continual frequent dialogue about observational data (Shortland, 2010). In

concert with findings from Dixon-Houston, (2012), creating a culture of trust and developing capacity for collaborative walkthrough observations that could call for adaptive change may result from a mutual process. Enacting adaptive change requires more than new schedules or systems to complete walkthrough observations – it will require developing a culture of shared accountability (O’Doherty & Ovando, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study and its findings are limited to the perspectives of teachers, aspiring to be instructional leaders, and enrolled in or recently graduated, from a single university program. Given the nature and scope of this exploratory study, caution should be taken when generalizing the findings of this study. It should also be noted that the majority of the participants in this study (72%) completed the questionnaire prior to completing coursework on instructional supervision. The remaining six (18%) participants were serving as assistant principals for the first time, which may explain a focus on the bureaucratic approach as opposed to the collaborative approach. Furthermore, it may be that they reflected upon the practices currently occurring at his/her school site – rather than describing how he/she might conduct walkthrough observations as a campus leader. This leads us to question whether or not the campus environment has a more powerful influence on practice than coursework.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the bureaucratic approach reflects a unilateral instructional leadership in which the principal is the driving force that influences teachers’ instructional decisions. Even so, the collaborative approach reflects shared instructional leadership in which the principal, teachers, and others, jointly drive the enhancement of instructional capacity. While limited in scope, our findings may provide insight for school leaders about the need to develop leadership capacity among teachers and other school professionals to conduct walkthrough observations. For example, principal preparation programs should promote data collection through walkthrough observations and instruction-focused dialogue between teachers and school administrators to ensure effective teaching and student academic success. By embracing a collaborative approach, principals may be in a better position to address certain factors that may impact the effectiveness of walkthrough observations (time constraints, scheduling, frequency of these observations, teachers’ attitudes, inconsistency with feedback from various observers, and lack of coherence between stated purpose and beliefs and/or actions), as described in the bureaucratic approach. This echoes Lee’s (2003) assertion that “frequent classroom visits help refresh your memory and build relationships with teachers. By being visible, you can foster a comfortable rapport with your staff and the student body” (p. 88).

### **Implications for Future Research**

Finally, given the focus of this exploratory study and the small sample size, additional inquiry should include a larger sample of aspiring instructional leaders from different school levels. This includes more empirical studies documenting teacher perceptions of walkthroughs to extend our understanding of the effect of these types of observations. In addition, empirical studies comparing principal and teacher perceptions of the process and the influence of walkthroughs should be conducted to explicitly describe the potential to enhance teacher growth and student achievement.

## References

- Ariasian, P. W., & Gullickson, A. (2006). Teacher self-evaluation. In Stronge, J. H. (Ed.), *Evaluating teaching: A guide to current thinking and best Practice* (pp. 186-211). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Brown, G. B., & Coley, K. S. (2011). The effect of walkthrough observations on teacher perspectives in Christian schools. *Christian Perspectives in Education*, 4(2), 1-24.
- Bushman, J. (2006). Teachers as walkthrough partners. *Educational Leadership*, 63(6), 58-61.
- Calvin, G., Flannery, K. B., Sugai, G., & Monegan, J. (2009). Using observational data to provide performance feedback to teachers: A high school case study. *Preventing School Failure*, 53(2), 95-104.
- Colasacco, J. (2010). A week of observations. *Educational Leadership*, 68(4), 59-62.
- Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B. (2000). Getting into the habit of reflection. *Educational Leadership*, 57(7), 60-62.
- Cudeiro, A., & Nelsen, J. (2009). The next generation of walkthroughs. *Leadership*, 38(3), 18-21.
- David, J. L. (2008). What research says about...classroom walkthroughs. *Educational Leadership*, 65(4), 81-82.
- Dixon-Houston, M. I. (2012). *Teacher-Principal Collegiality and Instructional Supervision: A Case Study of Relationships in the Context of Walkthrough Observations in Six Rural South Carolina Schools*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina.
- Downey, C., Steffy, B. E., English, F. W., Frase, L. E., & Poston, W. K. Jr. (2004). *Changing school supervisory practices one teacher at the time: The three-minute classroom walkthrough*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Fisher, L. (2013). Walkthroughs accelerate achievement. *Principal*, 92(4), 40-41.
- Ginsberg, M. B., & Murphy, D. (2002). How walkthroughs open doors. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 34-36.
- Granada, J., & Vriesenga, M. (2008). Web-based walkthroughs. *Principal Leadership*, 8(7), 24-27.
- Jorissen, K. T., & Sundstrum, Allen, A. (2009, November). *Using teaching learning walks to improve instruction: A leadership and school capacity building collaborative*. Paper presented at the meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Anaheim, CA.
- Kachur, D. S., Stout, J. A., & Edwards, C. L. (2010). *Classroom walkthroughs to improve teaching and learning*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Kachur, D. S., Stout, J. A., & Edwards, C. L. (2013). *Engaging teachers in classroom walkthroughs*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Keruskin, T. E. (2005). *The perceptions of high school principals on student achievement by conducting walkthroughs*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.
- Lee, J. (2003). Lessons for a new administrator. *Educational leadership*, 61(3), 88-89.
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2005). *Practical research: Planning and design* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Columbus, OH: Pearson: Merrill Prentice Hall.

- Marks, H. M., & Printy, S. M. (2003). Principal leadership and school performance: An integration of transformational and instructional leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(3), 370-397.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2011). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Minnear-Peplinski, R. M., (2009). Principals' and teachers' perceptions of teacher supervision. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
- Moss, C. M., & Brookhart, S. M. (2013). A new view of walk-throughs. *Educational Leadership*, 70(7), 42-45.
- O'Doherty, A., & Ovando, M. N. (2009). Drivers of success: One district's process for closing achievement gaps in a post-No Child Left Behind context. *Journal of School Leadership*, 19(1), 6-32.
- O'Doherty, A. & Ovando, M. N. (2013). Leading learning: First-year principals' reflections of instructional leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*, 3(23), 533-561.
- Ovando, M. N. (2001). Teachers' perceptions' of a learner-centered teacher evaluation system. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 15(3), 213-232.
- Ovando, M. N. (2005). Building instructional leaders' capacity to deliver constructive feedback to teachers. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 18 (3), 171-183.
- Ovando, M. N., & O'Doherty, A. (2010). *Looking at the past, visualizing the future: First year principals' reflections of instructional leadership*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, Denver, CO.
- Ovando, M. N., & Ramirez, A., Jr. (2007). Principals' instructional leadership within a teacher appraisal system: Enhancing students' academic success. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 20(1-2), 85-110.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Range, B. G., Scherz, S., Holt C. R., & Young S. (2011). Supervision and evaluation: The Wyoming perspective. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability*, 23(3), 243-265. doi: 10.1007/s11092-011-9123-5
- Ribas, W. B. (2001). *Teacher evaluation that works!!* Westwood, Massachusetts: Ribas Publications.
- Roberts, S. M., & Pruitt, E.Z. (2003). *Schools as professional learning communities: Collaborative activities and strategies for professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Rossi, G. A. (2007). *The Classroom Walkthrough: The Perceptions of Elementary School Principals on its Impact on Student Achievement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.
- Sergiovanni, T. J., & Starratt, R. J. (2007). *Supervision: A redefinition*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Sergiovanni, T. J., & Starratt, R. J., & Cho, V. (2014). *Supervision: A redefinition*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Shortland, S. (2010). Feedback within peer observation: continuing professional development and unexpected consequences. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(3), 295-304.
- Stronge, J. H. (2006). *Evaluating teaching: A guide to current thinking and best practice* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA; Corwin Press.



- Sullivan, S., & Glanz, J. (2005). *Supervision that improves teaching: Strategies and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Topolka-Jorissen, K. T., & Allen, A. S. (2009). *Using Teacher Learning Walks to Improve Instruction: A leadership and School Capacity Building Collaborative*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Anaheim, CA.
- U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement (2004). *Innovative Pathways to School Leadership*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Wallace Foundation. (2013). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning*. Perspective: Expanded Edition (January, 2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective-principal-leadership/Pages/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to-Better-Teaching-and-Learning.aspx>
- Zepeda, S. (2005). *The instructional leader's guide to informal classroom observations*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education
- Zepeda, S. (2006). Classroom-based assessment of teaching and learning. In Stronge, J. H. (Ed.), *Evaluating teaching: A guide to current thinking and best practice* (pp. 101-118). Thousand Oaks, CA; Corwin Press.
- Ziegler, C. (2006). Walk-throughs provide stepped-up support. *Journal of Staff Development*, 27(4), 53-56.