Building Observation And Conferencing Skills

I have had several opportunities in the last month to spend time with coaches and principals doing group observations in teachers classrooms followed by group discussion of individual's analysis of what they saw happening in the teaching/ learning process. These sessions often conclude with my modeling of a conference with the teacher about the observation. The goal of these post conferences is to engage the teacher in an analysis of what occurred and for the teacher to create any next step actions based on her understandings.

Two insights have emerged from my experiences:

#1 Many principals have had few opportunities to conduct shared analysis of teaching/learning with colleagues as part of their own professional development. (Many find it difficult to disconnect from evaluation training focused on "what the teacher did" to analyzing how the student behaviors/actions are impacting learning outcomes.)

#2 The payoff from short conversations with teachers following short observations can be tremendous. I have experienced 15 minute observations followed by 15 minute conversations producing immediate experimentation by the teacher in a new strategy (5 minutes later at the start of his next class) and extended critical thinking and experimentation around teaching decisions. (Just received the third follow up email from a teacher regarding changes she is implementing.)
Excerpt***: Wow—so I had a lot to think about yesterday. I loved our conversation and it really pushed me to think about why I was really having my students write about those words… Today I moved forward. I actually gave my student highlighters and story problems and we talked about "close reading" which is something I focus on during my reading/writing block but have not thought about it during math… I can't thank you enough***

for giving me direction to push myself into thinking about this little idea that can really add to their ability to be independent thinkers and problem solvers. *(Note her action ideas came after the coaching conversation.)*

In the Winter 2013 edition of Learningforward's **The Learning Principal***, Valerie von Frank shares observation strategies that lead to teacher growth. She summarizes suggestions from Jon Saphier, founder of Research for Better Teaching and Kim Marshall from New Leaders. While the article considers principals' roles as evaluators, suggestions connect to the growth oriented coaching role of principals and coaches as well.

"Both Saphier and Marshall recommend visits of at least 10 to 15 minutes rather than shorter walk-throughs in order to get impressions of individual teachers. Shorter visits can be useful to get a cross-section of information about instruction to use to develop whole- faculty professional learning."

I've been suggesting that as observers enter the room, they identify the tasks students are engaged with, then identify the student behaviors within the tasks (overall and individually), lastly the teacher behaviors and how they affect the student behaviors. This seems to provide observational information and observer thinking that promotes the follow up analysis and conversation.

Another two of Saphier's and Marshall's suggestions match with my personal experiences:

Take Literal Notes*: Avoid opinions or generalizations. Notes should describe actual words that were spoken or a picture of a problem a child had on her paper.*

Avoid the Ipad and other technology*: Technology can distract from one's ability to observe what's happening in the classroom and diminish the time available to interact with students, when appropriate.*

My personal finding (and it may be connected to my learning style) is that the use of forms and checklists interferes with my observation. The more I am looking at my recording tool the more I miss seeing and hearing. I may also be focused away from an important observation. The teaching and learning process is very active and complex. There is so much to see. Consistently, when observing with two or three other observers

we find during the debrief that there were things one person saw that the others didn’t.
I am amazed at the amount of learning for teachers, coaches, principals and myself that emerges from these sessions. This PD opportunity should be happening more often for all of us
*__**The Power of Observation: 5 ways to ensure teacher evaluations lead to teacher growth**__. The Learning principal, Learningforward. Valerie von Frank, Winter 2013 (Vol.8 no.2)