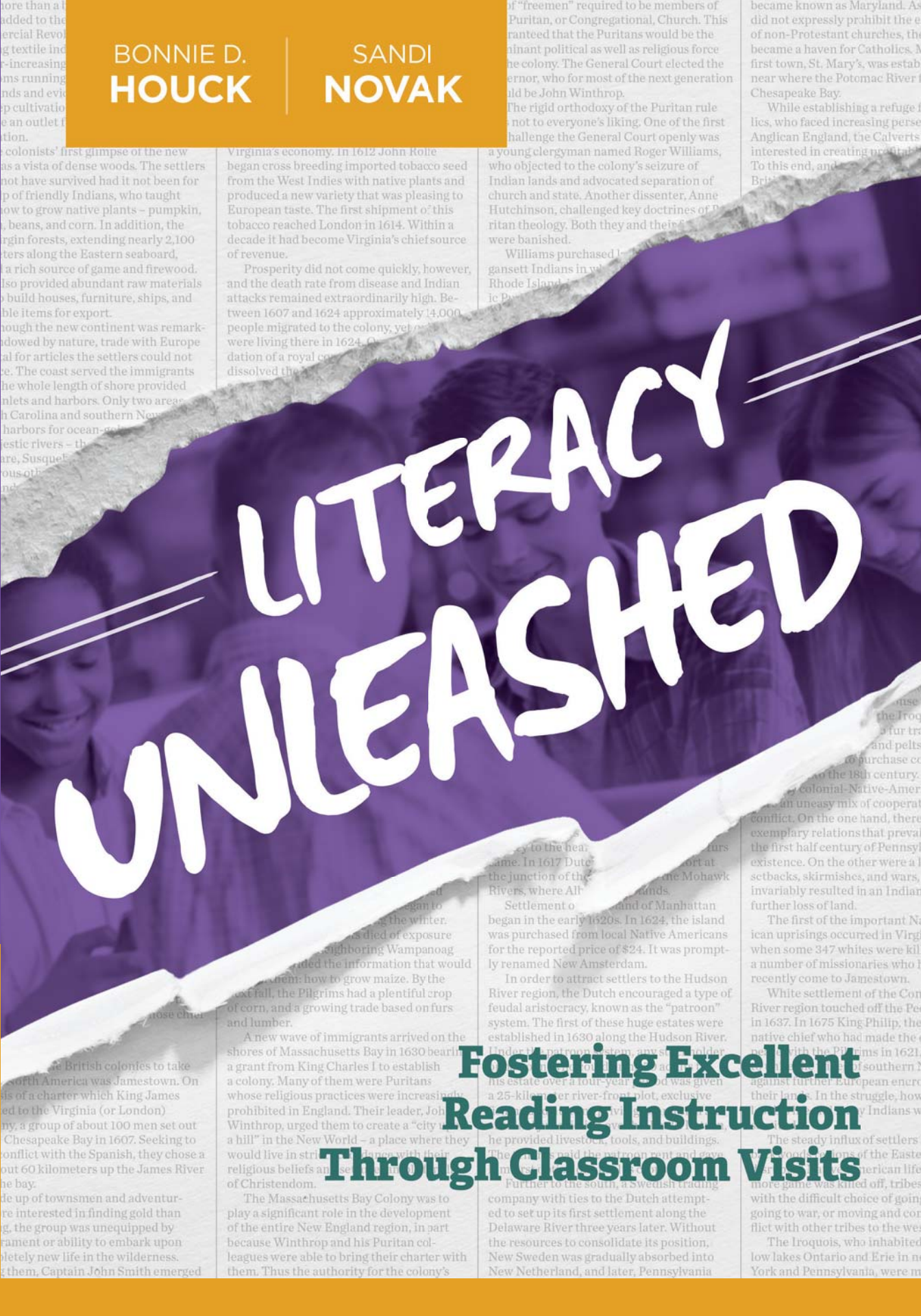
BONNIE D. HOUCK | SANDI NOVAK



Fostering Excellent Reading Instruction Through Classroom Visits

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LITERACY UNLEASHED

Fostering Excellent Reading Instruction Through Classroom Visits

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Introduction

In this book, we aim to provide school leaders and literacy leaders with the essential tools and resources to create a culture of literacy, reflective practice, and continual learning among staff and students. The processes and practices shared in these pages will help you develop a deeper understanding of quality literacy instruction and strengthen your ability to identify and discuss the instruction necessary for ongoing development of student literacy.

Although literacy is an aggregate of many skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, our Literacy Classroom Visit (LCV) Model focuses principally on reading development as the necessary foundation of overall literacy instruction. Accordingly, this book offers a repertoire of literacy tools, classroom observation formats, checklists, and conferencing templates that you can readily use to identify and address needs around literacy teaching and learning in your school or district.

Why Focus on Literacy?

If you are a principal or superintendent, you may be wondering whether learning about ways to evaluate and improve the quality of reading instruction in your school or district is a wise investment of your time. With so many other priorities—curriculum, instruction, staff development, school climate and safety, and family engagement, among others—why put literacy at the top of the list? Read on.

Where We Are

Most of us can probably agree that developing students into accomplished lifelong readers is the cornerstone of learning and educational achievement, providing the means by which students gain most of their

content knowledge both in and out of school. But literacy also has long-range benefits that extend beyond the academic sphere. The ability to read not only makes us better learners and communicators but also arms us against oppression and benefits us financially (Gallagher, 2003): witness the strong correlation between literacy difficulties and dropout rates, incarceration, and welfare status. In addition, somewhere between one-half and two-thirds of new jobs in the future will require a college education and higher-level literacy skills (Graham & Hebert, 2010).

Unfortunately, the United States is failing to meet the goal of teaching all students to read. Forty percent of high school graduates lack the required literacy skills that employers desire (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2005), and two-thirds of students at the 4th and 8th grade levels are not proficient readers (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2014). These data have remained essentially unchanged for more than two decades, despite the heavy emphasis on reading instruction and assessment that's been in place since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Where We Need to Go

Clearly, something needs to change. The Common Core State Standards have made a start by bringing renewed attention to the need for *all* teachers—at every grade level and in every subject area—to be literacy teachers. We can't overstate the importance of this.

Good literacy instruction is essential throughout K–12 education. Preschool through 3rd grade are years of vital development: if children do not reach progressive milestones in these early years, they have little chance of ever catching up (Juel, 1994). The learning doesn't stop after these early grades, though: a student reading proficiently at, say, 5th grade will remain at the same reading level in subsequent grades unless he or she is consistently taught strategies to glean knowledge from more difficult and specialized texts (Joftus, 2002). Although some reading problems in middle and high school may stem from a lack of quality literacy instruction in the elementary grades, the culprit is more likely a lack of instruction in reading complex text throughout the upper grades (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Simply put, there's no point at which students are "done" learning to read. They need to continually hone their skills to be able to comprehend, internalize, and transfer knowledge

from progressively more complex and sophisticated texts. This is crucial preparation for the demands of college, career, and life.

It is equally important to teach literacy across the content areas. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) aim for students in grades 6–12 to be able to independently build knowledge in these disciplines through reading and writing. Literacy and learning within the content areas of science and social studies have become a requirement for adolescent readers to succeed (Kosanovich, Reed, & Miller, 2010). In a shift from traditional standards, the Common Core places increased emphasis on informational text, and none too soon: in some schools, it is common to have classes in which 75–80 percent of students cannot successfully read their textbooks (Carnine & Carnine, 2004).

Teaching students the skills required to make sense of a variety of texts and write for diverse purposes is an ongoing task to which all teachers must deeply commit themselves, because effective instruction—regardless of school location, student demographics, or financial constraints—leads to greater student learning (Hattie, 2008; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2004). And, in turn, it is school leaders' job to identify the components of effective instruction so that we can provide the resources and training that teachers need to foster the highest possible gains in student achievement (Colvin & Johnson, 2007; Fisher & Adler, 1999).

Enter the Literacy Classroom Visit Model

We've established *why* ensuring effective literacy instruction is such a high priority for school leaders; *how* to do this is another challenge altogether. This is where our Literacy Classroom Visit Model comes in.

The LCV Model is not a gimmicky framework we came up with over the course of a few days; it's the result of years of observation, coaching, training, data gathering, experimentation, and revision. From 2003 to 2008, Bonnie worked as the state reading specialist in the Minnesota Department of Education. A large portion of her responsibilities consisted of identifying the research-based practices behind effective reading instruction. It became apparent to her that knowing these practices by name did not equip school leaders to be able to recognize them during

classroom visits, explain how the practices were being implemented in their schools, or identify the professional development that teachers needed in order to learn and implement these practices. Accordingly, Bonnie worked to develop instruments and processes to help leaders identify effective literacy teaching and student learning. These processes yielded concrete, consistent data that supported districts in their important work of developing quality literacy education.

Our paths crossed when Sandi—then an assistant superintendent in a suburban school district—hired Bonnie as a district literacy coordinator. Sandi's expertise as a leader of leaders and cognitive coach and the breadth of her experience at the school and district levels added new dimensions to the processes that Bonnie had developed.

The Literacy Classroom Visit Model is what emerged from our years of collaboration in guiding school and district leaders in making classroom visits and using data to provide teachers with targeted, actionable feedback. Through conference sessions, leadership workshops, seminar courses, and our work with schools and districts across the United States, the Literacy Classroom Visit Model has evolved into a solid system that schools and districts can use to guide effective literacy teaching and lasting improvement.

How This Book Is Organized

Part I of this book describes the attributes of a strong literacy culture, the importance of literacy leadership, and walkthrough observation models. In this section, we introduce the Literacy Classroom Visit Model and its overarching purpose and goals.

In Part II, we describe how to develop a classroom visit schedule, explaining the number of classrooms to visit, how long to spend in each classroom, how to ensure consistency among visiting teams, and how to identify and describe patterns of practice. We outline ways to determine an area of focus, identified either from previous classroom visits or from other school literacy data; provide examples of data collection techniques and a protocol for data collection; show how well-designed and well-facilitated discussions can provide opportunities for staff to reflect on the nature of teaching and learning; and describe how to take your school's instructional practices to the next level of proficiency. Part II also examines ways in which Literacy Classroom Visits can be modified specifically

for content-area classrooms. These data add to the overall knowledge of the literacy culture and instructional delivery in a school or district.

Part III explains how to sustain the LCV Model over time and move beyond a school-focused model to a districtwide system of data collection, reflection, analysis, and action.

Each of the three parts of this book begins with a scenario from a school or district using the Literacy Classroom Visit Model and ends with "Reflection to Action" prompts to help you implement the model in your school or district. Quotations and video clips from educators who are using the LCV Model provide deeper context. These companion videos introduce the concepts of the Literacy Classroom Visit Model, extend the content to help you visualize what it looks like in action, and convey how principals, literacy leaders, and district administrators can use the LCV structure in their schools and districts. You can find a list of the videos in Appendix C, and they're available at www.ascd.org/Publications/Books/Literacy-Unleashed-Book-Video-Clips.aspx. We use the icon pictured to the left throughout the book to indicate these videos.

In addition, we have made many of this book's tools and forms available online to fill in or print out. You can access these resources at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/houck2016.pdf. Use the password "houck116042" to unlock the PDF.

During the last decade, we have focused on helping teachers and school leaders to integrate high-quality, complex research into the realities of day-to-day teaching. We hold the highest regard for all educators, knowing it is their hard work and passion that have the power to make the greatest difference in our world. We hope our book will support your work and profoundly affect literacy instruction and leadership in your school or district.

PART I:

Developing and Leading a Literacy Culture

SCENARIO: BARNUM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Four years ago, teachers at Barnum Elementary School would have told you that their instructional practices were above average—or at least average. However, students' performance on standards-based and achievement assessments during that time told a different story, especially in the area of reading.

With the data challenging our assumptions, we couldn't hide from the reality that we needed to change our teaching practices. We wanted our students to grow and achieve. We did not want the stigma of having underperforming classrooms to cause divisiveness or finger-pointing within our community. By discussing our student data, the leadership team and the teachers decided to come together, create common practices throughout the school, and support both team and individual growth.

We decided to shift the focus from student test scores to our teaching practices. Taking the emphasis off of test scores gave our teachers room to breathe and freed us from the emotional baggage that low test scores can bring, allowing us to grab on to practices that transformed our school's literacy culture.

At first, we purchased resources and tried a variety of "one and done" workshops to broaden our teaching practices. Once we realized that this piecemeal approach was not getting us where we wanted to be, we incorporated the Literacy Classroom Visit Model. The LCV Model provided a way for us to examine our school's literacy culture and the effectiveness of our current instruction. We gained a common language and common expectations. This schoolwide effort didn't happen in a

vacuum but was accompanied by plenty of debate, discussion, and professional development.

Over time, we used the LCV Model to gather schoolwide, grade-level, and, eventually, individual teaching data. We moved from having individual and common grade-level practices to setting consistent schoolwide expectations. Our focus on developing a schoolwide culture of literacy helped us provide meaningful professional development tailored to the specific needs of our building, teacher teams, and individual educators. The results speak for themselves: we went from being a Continuous Improvement school where teachers were doing many good things to becoming a Reward School where all teachers are guided by research-supported best practices within our established expectations for literacy.

The LCV Model was instrumental in providing the clarity and focus that we needed across our K–6 instruction. Our test scores and LCV data now prove that we are providing above-average instruction. Just ask any teacher in the building!

Tom Cawcutt, Principal
Barnum Elementary School
Barnum, Minnesota

1 Making the Case for the Literacy Classroom Visit Model

Schools that have successful literacy programs show evidence of strong principal leadership, with focused attention on setting a literacy agenda, supporting teachers, accessing resources, and building a capacity for further growth.

—David Booth and Jennifer Rowsell, *The Literacy Principal*

School leaders assume the heavy responsibility of ensuring continuous learning for both teachers and students. Although many educators who enter the administrative track tend to drift away from the areas of teaching and learning, principals need enough content knowledge to be able to assess the instruction they see (Fink & Resnick, 2001).

The role of the principal as instructional leader is becoming increasingly important in light of the current focus on teacher effectiveness and a growing consensus in the field on what effective teachers do to enhance student learning (MET Project, 2013). Since researchers have begun to quantify the average effects of specific instructional strategies (Marzano et al., 2004), educators should, in theory, be able to close the gap between what they know works and what they are doing in their classrooms.

Yet despite increased scrutiny of literacy instruction, little has been done to examine the specific knowledge that principals need regarding literacy teaching and learning, or how districts can build literacy leadership capacity. As Reeves (2008) noted, "If school leaders really

believe that literacy is a priority, then they have a personal responsibility to understand literacy instruction, define it for their colleagues, and observe it daily" (p. 91).

Leaders' Role and the Need for Data

So, how can leaders go about fulfilling this responsibility? Along with the job of recruiting, hiring, and sustaining quality staff who enhance students' overall literacy learning, a literacy leader must gain an understanding of literacy teaching practices and be able to help classroom teachers ensure that all students learn to read, write, and think critically about different kinds of texts. Education leaders who are not proficient in their knowledge of literacy instruction have a difficult time determining the key qualifications that excellent teachers possess (Stein & Nelson, 2003).

Thus, leaders need a system to collect and analyze timely and useful information about (1) the current instructional practices in their schools and (2) how students engage and collaborate in the process of learning. These data must be collected consistently, with a clear purpose and without the intent of using them to evaluate individuals' teaching performance. Data collection should focus on how the instructional learning environment and classroom practices foster student learning, and the data should be used to celebrate areas of success and illuminate areas of need. Leaders can then address the areas of need by providing teachers with targeted professional learning opportunities and other resources. The method of data collection should also provide a way to determine how well these resources and learning experiences are effecting the intended changes in teaching and learning.

The Power of Classroom Visits

Research (Protheroe, 2009) supports the value of regular classroom visits as integral to the ongoing work of education leaders. These visits may take the form of instructional rounds, walkthroughs, observations, or any series of scheduled visits that can either capture broad impressions of overall instruction or home in on key areas. Typically, these visits are done informally for the purpose of data collection and professional growth. However, in some instances, districts and school administrators use them as part of their formal observations in the evaluation process.

Conducting informal observations enables school administrators to evaluate job-embedded professional development initiatives, collect evidence related to curricular programs, and identify trends in instructional practices (Stout, Kachur, & Edwards, 2009). Ideally, the process also provides teachers with the feedback they need to evaluate their own effectiveness in applying their professional learning (Hopkins, 2008).

Frequent, brief . . . walkthroughs can foster a school culture of collaborative learning and dialogue. (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002, p. 34)

Walkthroughs and instructional rounds both have a defined purpose and can provide rich and useful data for education leaders. Establishing time and a process for classroom visits, as these practices do, can help leaders establish themselves as instructional leaders and mentors; familiarize themselves with the climate, curriculum, and practices in the building; and develop partnerships in discussing common practices and needs (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002). The classroom walkthrough process can also create a framework for designing and evaluating schoolwide professional development (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007) and be used to increase student achievement (Skretta, 2008). Although walkthrough models may vary in design and implementation, their goal remains the same: to enhance student learning and achievement by improving instruction (Scott, 2012). Instructional rounds are another method of gathering data, involving teams that work collaboratively to make sense of their observations and draw logical conclusions (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

Concerns About Walkthrough Protocols

In practice, classroom observations can fall short of their intended purpose unless considerable care has been given to the walkthrough form and the feedback process. Too often, the walkthrough form consists of broad checklists of generic practices that do not identify a clear purpose or articulate specific instructional "look-fors" and thus do not provide leaders with the information they need to give appropriate or accurate feedback (Pitler & Goodwin, 2008). With respect to literacy in particular,

without a clear understanding of what effective literacy instruction looks like, this method accomplishes little (Hoewing, 2011).

Sometimes walkthroughs are used for individual teacher evaluation, which goes against the intent of the original practice. In such cases, feedback is given to individuals after only a few short visits to their classrooms, diminishing trust in the process as well as the leader. As many scholars (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Liu & Mulfinger, 2011) have asserted, the current teacher evaluation system in many schools across the United States—which incorporates walkthrough practices—is flawed because feedback is infrequent and broad or focused on areas other than quality instruction.

If leaders do not clearly communicate the purpose of their walkthroughs and look for specific, research-supported instructional practices that have been discussed with teachers, the observation and the feedback they provide may be worthless or, worse, damaging to educators and students alike (Pitler & Goodwin, 2008). The process can also create significant anxiety and resistance among teachers. In order to be an effective tool for instructional improvement, the culminating data must be used to identify professional learning and resource needs that are known factors in teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Ginsberg, 2001).

The LCV Model: A Better Way

Literacy Classroom Visits incorporate the best aspects of walkthroughs: they are brief, frequent, informal, and focused visits to classrooms by observers whose purpose is to gather data about teaching practices and engage in collaborative follow-up. Like instructional rounds, Literacy Classroom Visits can be conducted in teams and focus on student learning and collaborative discussion around descriptive, nonjudgmental data. However, they are unique in that they concentrate specifically on research-supported practices that have a direct effect on literacy achievement.

The Literacy Classroom Visit Model is also distinctive in terms of how data are collected and analyzed to direct the focus on specific data patterns. These patterns highlight instruction and learning of the community rather than the practices of individuals. Over time, they reveal evidence of a developing culture of literacy as well as effective practices that integrate balanced literacy instruction and the gradual release of responsibility (approaches that we delve into in subsequent chapters).

No matter how wonderful they are, reading programs, resources, and research-based approaches are productive only when used by effective

teachers using proven practices for excellent instruction (Allington, 2002). Finding the sweet spot among what research says about effective instruction, what teachers know and are doing in the classroom, and how these elements intersect with student development can be challenging. The LCV Model provides a solid vehicle to find this crucial intersection, combining research about best practices in literacy instruction and classroom delivery methods with how students engage and learn to read and write. The data gathered during these visits provide the information that teachers need to be most effective.

What Are We Looking For?

Literacy Classroom Visits are seated in research-based practices that are essential to helping students become critical thinkers, effective readers, and meaning makers. The "look-fors" listed on the LCV instrument (see Figure 1.1, also available online; see note on p. 5) are a carefully distilled and field-tested compendium of research-supported instructional practices specific to literacy. In addition, the LCV instrument integrates general instructional best practices, such as the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), differentiated instruction (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000), and purposeful student engagement. The resulting formula creates a strong foundation of instructional practices that promote student growth and achievement. **Video 1.1** provides an overview of the full process.

Collecting Literacy Classroom Visit data over time can

- Establish a body of evidence about a school's or district's overall literacy culture and instruction.
- Identify instructional patterns within teacher teams, grade levels, and content areas.
- Pinpoint resource needs and reduce unnecessary budget expenditures.
- Guide planning for professional learning and professional learning community (PLC) team content.
- Establish common beliefs, practices, and language within the community.
- Inform a school community about the implementation of professional learning goals.
- Ensure that students are learning and mastering grade-level standards and expectations.

Figure 1.1 | *Literacy Classroom Visit Instrument*

Teacher/Grade_____ **Date/Time** _____ **Observer** _____

Classroom Environment and Culture	Notes:
▢ Classroom structure and practices support a developing culture of literacy. ▢ Students are actively and purposefully engaged in literacy-focused learning activities. ▢ Classroom library is organized to support self-selection and class size/level (300+ texts). ▢ Classroom library has a balance of fiction/informational texts at varied levels. ▢ Rituals, routines, and procedures are in place (I-Charts, process for book selection, etc.). ▢ Displays of student work show development and celebrate literacy learning. ▢ Interactive word walls are used to support writing and vocabulary development.	
Learning Target/Instructional Goal	
▢ Learning target/goal is posted in student-friendly language. ▢ Learning target/goal identifies demonstration of learning (performance criteria). ▢ Learning target/goal is taught and monitored across the gradual release of responsibility.	
Observed Method of Instructional Delivery	
▢ Whole-group lesson or mini-lesson ▢ Small-group lesson ▢ Independent reading and application	
Whole-Group Explicit Instruction	
▢ Teacher is leading a focused mini-lesson or lesson using time effectively for age range. ▢ Teacher is explicitly teaching/modeling effective skill/strategy (learning target). ▢ Students are actively listening, purposefully engaged, and interacting with teacher. ▢ Students are actively listening, purposefully engaged, and interacting with peers.	
Small-Group Guided Practice	
▢ Teacher is guiding students' reading, strategy application, and collaborative discussions. ▢ Teacher is listening to students read individually while others read quietly. ▢ Teacher is assessing strengths/needs and collecting anecdotal notes. ▢ Students are reading and discussing texts at their instructional level. ▢ Students are practicing the skill or strategy explicitly taught and modeled in whole group.	

Independent Reading and Application	
▢ Teacher is conferring one-on-one with reader. ▢ Teacher is assessing development and recording data. ▢ Students are reading self-selected books from a bag or bin and applying strategies. ▢ Students are conferring with teacher using skills and demonstrating learning target. ▢ Students are actively working at some other connected literacy enhancement activity.	
Student Interaction and Understanding	
▢ Students can explain the skill/strategy. ▢ Students know what they are supposed to learn and how they are expected to demonstrate that learning in whole or small group or on their own. ▢ N/A (Did not speak with student)	
Comments/Feedback:	
Possible Prompts for Peer Discussions (PLCs):	

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The purpose of any data collection system is to get at the heart of what students are doing and understanding in a holistic way that is quite different from assessment measures (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007). As instructional leaders, principals can systematically work with teachers to learn about what teachers are teaching *and* what students are learning. Literacy Classroom Visits capture and document moments in time that, when woven together, can accurately tell the story of a classroom, grade level, school, or district. This requires not only time and commitment but also an established structure that is supported by trust, continuous learning, and a spirit of inquiry.

The Structure of Literacy Classroom Visits: An Overview

In the chapters to follow, we present a deep examination of what Literacy Classroom Visits look like in practice. For now, here is a brief overview.

Purpose. The predominant purpose of Literacy Classroom Visits is to provide educators with the tools, strategies, and processes to foster learning environments in which students become successful and motivated readers and writers. Through these visits, leaders regularly observe current literacy learning by using an ongoing system of data collection and analysis that informs them of the current literacy practices in their schools or districts.

Literacy Classroom Visits are different from other walkthroughs I have done in the past because I am intentional and my focus is singular in purpose. A classroom is a complicated network of learning experiences and interactions. If a principal tries to observe it all, it can be overwhelming. Literacy Classroom Visits define and outline very specific things to look for, providing more clarity and purpose in why I am visiting the classroom by identifying what data to collect related to improving and meeting the literacy needs of our students.

Abe Rodemeyer, Principal

Process. Literacy Classroom Visits are an ongoing series of short (three- to five-minute), planned visits specifically focused on best practices of literacy instruction and learning. Literacy Classroom Visits occur frequently throughout the course of each school year. They provide multiple firsthand snapshots of teaching and learning that take the pulse of literacy within a school and distinguish patterns in practice that can be used to inform instruction and improvement efforts.

Use of data. Data from a single, brief classroom visit are not useful. In contrast, the data patterns that emerge over time through regular visits provide a rich tapestry of insight into student learning and teacher development. Analyzing the accumulated data requires reflection and conversation about the patterns that arise. These data conversations

can take place among leaders or groups of teachers or across a teaching community.

Implementation and ongoing practice. The data from the visits are used not to evaluate teachers but to illuminate what teachers need to support their literacy instruction and ensure student growth. As these needs are identified, leaders reflect on which resources and professional learning opportunities have the greatest effect on teaching and learning. As resources are obtained and new practices are learned, Literacy Classroom Visits can be modified to collect specific data to determine how well the implementation is working. This cyclical process of data collection and review offers valuable formative information that not only supports improvement in instructional delivery but also contributes to high-quality professional development practices.

A Catalyst for Lasting Change

Good leaders recognize the value of effective teachers and the instructional environments they create. Accordingly, they understand how important it is to identify and provide the resources and professional learning experiences that teachers need in order to increase student achievement (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). The LCV Model supports leaders in this essential task by helping them to collect and analyze information about current classroom practices and to provide teachers with the support they need to grow. Used well, the LCV Model is a catalyst for lasting change. By incorporating purposeful Literacy Classroom Visits into their improvement efforts, principals can create—and sustain—a powerful culture of literacy throughout the school community.

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At the time of publication, the following ASCD resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses). For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of *Educational Leadership* at http://www.ascd.org/el.

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Print Products
A Close Look at Close Reading: Teaching Students to Analyze Complex Texts, Grades 6–12 by Barbara Moss, Diane Lapp, Maria Grant, and Kelly Johnson (#115002)
Differentiated Literacy Coaching: Scaffolding for Student and Teacher Success by Mary Catherine Moran (#107053)
Effective Literacy Coaching: Building Expertise and a Culture of Literacy (An ASCD Action Tool) by Shari Frost, Roberta Buhle, and Camille Blachowicz (#109044)
Formative Classroom Walkthroughs: How Principals and Teachers Collaborate to Raise Student Achievement by Connie M. Moss and Susan M. Brookhart (#115003)
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