

**Peer Observation: Supporting Professional Learning
in Six High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Schools**

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Abstract

This qualitative analysis of peer observation practices is part of a larger, comparative case study, “Developing Human Capital Within Schools,” conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. Within one city, we interviewed 142 teachers and administrators in six high-poverty schools (traditional, charter, and turnaround), all of which had achieved the highest rating in the state’s accountability system. Here, we analyze how teachers and administrators experienced and assessed peer observation practices. At the time of this study, all six schools (three charter and three district) had achieved the highest level in the state accountability rating system, having demonstrated significant growth or high levels of achievement on the rigorous state standardized test. All schools were implementing a range of peer observation processes. Although traditional norms of privacy (Little, 1990) among teachers in American schools often discourage them from visiting colleagues’ classes, many teachers in these schools welcomed opportunities to observe others’ teaching, and in some cases to be observed. However, the extent to which the schools had developed their systems for peer observation varied, which was evident in their different programs’ purpose, procedures, support for teachers in implementing the processes, and the degree to which peer observation was integrated with other professional learning. Notably, across all six schools, teachers and administrators viewed peer observation as having great potential and hoped to continue this practice or in some cases reinstate it in the future. Across schools, the strategic use of video technology helped several schools address implementation challenges.

This working paper is part of a larger study conducted by researchers at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. We are indebted to the Spencer Foundation and to the Harvard Graduate School of Education for funding this project, although all views presented here are our own. We appreciate the comments and recommendations of Judith Warren Little at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 2015. David Cohen, Andrés Alonso and Sarah Fiarman also provided insightful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. We are deeply grateful to the administrators and teachers who participated in this study.

Growing demands on America's teachers require them to have opportunities to learn and improve throughout their career. Louis and Kruse (1995) suggest that this need is most pressing in urban schools where "the failures of our educational system are nowhere more apparent" (p.4). Although peer observation was identified decades ago as a promising practice to support teachers' learning in K-12 education (Bird & Little, 1986; Showers, 1985; Tallerico, 2014), it remains uncommon in schools today (Little, 2007) and virtually unstudied.

Scholars have long acknowledged the power of watching others teach as a learning opportunity for educators. In his classic portrayal of teachers and their professional environment, Lortie (1975) suggests that all teachers are influenced by having observed teaching throughout their schooling, what he calls "the apprenticeship of observation" (p.61). However, he cautions that this experience comes with significant limitations, because students who spend many hours watching their teacher have no pedagogical framework in which to interpret what they see, making their learning "intuitive and imitative rather than explicit and analytical" (p.62). Lortie and others argue that, consequently, teachers need opportunities to examine the beliefs and traditions that grow out of these early, formative experiences (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Little, 1987).

It follows that, if new and experienced teachers could have systematic opportunities for peer observation and analysis of their observations, there would be great potential for learning. Scholars suggest that teachers can gain knowledge and skills from closely watching their peers teach, in some cases providing feedback, and/or collaboratively analyzing the learning and teaching observed (Bird & Little, 1986; Little, 1987; Showers, 1985; Tallerico, 2014). Ultimately, peer observation within schools is intended, by those who promote it, to improve teaching quality and student learning.

In addition, peer observation is one way to reduce the professional isolation that American teachers frequently experience. Lortie (1975) and Tyack (1974) famously described the conventional school as an “egg crate,” where most teachers work largely in isolation, interacting with students in the privacy of their classroom. Bird and Little (1986) explain that these cellular structures “deprive teachers of the stimulation of working with peers and the close support they need to improve throughout their careers” (p.495). Youngs and Lane (2014) argue that professional learning activities that engage teachers in ongoing collaborative inquiry are likely to support continuous professional learning “in and from practice” (p.286). Peer observation offers teachers just such an opportunity to see their colleagues at work with students and reflect on their practice with a colleague, contributing to a culture of collaborative inquiry.

However, isolation also affords teachers privacy and instructional autonomy, both of which they have come to expect in American schools (Bird & Little, 1986; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975). In recent years, despite new collaborative learning structures introduced in many schools, researchers continue to find evidence that norms of privacy and non-interference among teachers persist (Little et al., 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2005). Researchers and practitioners have long identified these cultural norms as barriers to peer observation practices in American schools (Bird & Little, 1986; Feiman-Nemser, 1983). Teachers who believe that their classroom is their protected space and that they alone should determine what and how to teach are not likely to welcome observers—even their colleagues. Similarly, other teachers who respect those norms may be reluctant to interfere. Many questions remain about how peer observation practices are implemented in schools and how teachers experience them. When teachers have the opportunity to observe their colleagues in action and be observed, do they experience this as a positive experience or an invasion of their privacy, or both?

In this study, we focus on six urban public schools (three charter and three district) that are succeeding with students according to state accountability ratings. The group includes two former turnaround schools and one current restart school. All six were investing in developing their teachers in an effort to provide their students with improved educational opportunities. We entered this project intending to understand school-based professional learning opportunities for teachers; we did not expect peer observation to be an important mechanism for this learning. We were surprised to find that all of the schools in this exploratory study were arranging for, and in some cases requiring, teachers to observe their colleagues teaching. Given that peer observation in K-12 schools has received so little recent attention by researchers, these schools offered a promising opportunity to explore how the practice might support on-the-job learning for teachers. In this analysis, we consider how teachers experienced the range of approaches to peer observation implemented by these schools. What did teachers hope to gain from the experience, what did they believe they achieved, and what barriers did they think impeded the process?

Literature Review

Research focusing directly on peer observation is scant. What is available is grounded in literature on teachers' professional norms and the role of observation in teachers' learning.

Traditional Norms of Teaching

Several decades ago, analysts first described the school as an "egg-crate" organization where teachers worked in isolation with their students, within the confines of their classroom (Lortie, 1975; Tyack, 1974). Strong norms of privacy, individualism and autonomy grew out of these organizational structures (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975). These norms hold that teachers should have a great deal of discretion over their instructional practice and make their professional decisions on their own.

For decades, practitioners and analysts have contended that, when teachers function as isolated educators who are at best loosely linked to colleagues, the students who move through the schools pay a price (Bird & Little, 1986; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Johnson, 1990; Little, 1987; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sizer, 1984; Youngs & Lane, 2014). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) make the case that in order to serve all learners, schools need to be places where teachers continuously improve, in part by being “well networked with each other” (p. 3). In an argument about the power of the organizational context for teachers’ work, Johnson (2012) suggests that policy makers and school leaders need to support individual teachers as professionals and also create systems and conditions that foster collective work that will help all of them to improve their instructional practice. Youngs and Lane (2014) argue that, in order for teachers to “engage in ambitious instruction” that supports students to learn at high-levels, they need to participate in professional development activities that engage them in ongoing collaborative inquiry. Despite agreement among scholars and practitioners about the potential benefits of teachers learning with and from colleagues through job-embedded collaborative experiences, little is known about specific practices, such as peer observation, that might support this development.

Research on Peer Observation

Academics have long suggested that providing teachers opportunities to observe and be observed by their colleagues can support improvement throughout their career and, at the same time, change the professional norms of teaching (Bird & Little, 1986; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Little, 1982, 1987; Showers, 1985; Tallericco, 2014). In their analysis of how schools organize teachers’ work, Bird and Little (1986) consider how traditional school structures and norms reinforce teachers’ professional isolation. Teachers seldom watch others teach, although doing so leads them to reflect on and modify their own teaching. In addition, the reality of professional

isolation means that teaching colleagues do not have shared experiences to inform professional dialogue. These researchers also highlight that a small number of schools do establish strong norms of “collegiality and experimentation,” which are reflected in improvement practices that include teachers “observing and being observed at work” (p.498). Despite many and varied claims about the potential benefits of observations among teachers, there is surprisingly little empirical work on the role that observations of colleagues plays in teachers’ learning, in part because so few schools create opportunities and expectations for them to observe one another as a professional opportunity. The few studies that do exist reinforce the promise of this practice and highlight the barriers that may discourage its wide use.

In the 1980s, Showers and colleagues examined the effects of “peer coaching” programs in schools, by which they meant teachers observing and providing feedback to one another. Showers (1985) suggests that there are two types of positive effects from peer observation: “facilitation of the transfer of training and development of norms of collegiality and experimentation” (p. 45). Peer coaching, in the form studied by Showers, was specifically designed to help teachers understand and implement practices or curriculum innovations that were being taught to teachers in staff development sessions outside of the classroom. This is philosophically different than the peer observation model examined in this paper, which generally starts with reflecting on teachers’ current practice rather than transfer of skills previously introduced in professional development sessions. Although Showers’ findings support the possibility that collegial observations positively influence the professional culture in schools, there are important differences between “peer coaching” and peer observation practices.

A second study of peer observation was linked to external professional development, in this case about how to teach writing. A partnership between University of Pennsylvania

researchers and Philadelphia Public Schools allowed for an in-depth analysis of “cross-visitation” as one component of the Philadelphia Writing Project (Lytle & Fecho, 1991). “Teacher consultants” participating in ongoing professional development through the Philadelphia Writing Project engaged in peer observation with colleagues who were not part of the external project. Cross-visitations with a particular focus on writing instruction were explicitly designed to support collaborative inquiry among teachers and to reduce their professional isolation. Based on interviews with teachers and analysis of their written reflections after participating in the program for one to four years, researchers found that participating teachers developed awareness of their colleagues’ instructional practices and felt a greater sense of interdependence.

Prior to participating in the Philadelphia initiative, many teachers reported that they had “never seen the teacher next door teach, despite fifteen or more years of proximity” (p. 11). The authors argue that “going public” with their instruction helped teachers to be more reflective and consequently to see their own classrooms as more “intellectually interesting.” Teachers did express concerns about the practice, including their loss of privacy, shame in needing help from others, and challenges in negotiating interactions with peers. Teacher consultants found it difficult to negotiate a reciprocal relationship with their peers during observation, given the fact that they were identified as being more knowledgeable about writing instruction. However, most teachers operated with assumptions of egalitarianism—that all teachers were equally skilled—a traditional professional norm in US schools (Lortie, 1975). Teachers also reported being concerned about losing time with their own students, even though the program provided them with long-term substitutes who were trained in the writing program. The intention was that the substitute could function as a member of the teacher team rather than as a traditional outside

substitute. Lytle and Fecho (1991) identified cross-visitation as a practice with great potential, but they also recognized that with the loss of isolation comes a loss of privacy, to which teachers had mixed reactions.

We have found only one study focusing on a peer observation practice in which neither teacher was expected to serve as an expert in relation to her colleague. Hamilton (2013) examined a year-long peer observation initiative in a suburban high school, where all 43 teachers were asked to determine a goal for their learning and select three colleagues they wished to observe. The focus was on the observer's learning and no feedback was provided to the teacher being observed. Hamilton surveyed faculty members and interviewed the principal and eight teachers, who had various teaching assignments and years of experience. Teachers appreciated being able to choose their own focus for learning and to select a colleague to observe. They reported that they gained respect for peers because they became aware of their expertise in content and pedagogy. In addition, teachers said that seeing colleagues' practice first-hand was more valuable than just talking about it and that observations reduced their sense of isolation. Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the process and many described specific examples of activities, strategies or pedagogical approaches that they tried with their own students as a result of their peer observation. It is unclear how teachers might have responded to peer observation models that include feedback for the observed teacher, which might have directly challenged norms of autonomy and non-interference (Little, 1990).

Taken together, these studies reinforce the potential of peer observation practices for supporting teachers' learning and for promoting norms of collaboration and continuous improvement. However, many questions remain: Can they be introduced so that they are not undermined by traditional professional norms? How can peer observations be implemented

within traditional school structures, including tight schedules that provide little open time for teachers to visit their peers' classes? How can peer observations be organized to support improvements in teachers' instructional practice?

In this exploratory analysis, we draw on the available research in order to understand how teachers experienced peer observation in six high-performing urban, high-poverty schools. In all of these schools, peer observation was embedded in a collaborative professional culture that promoted continuous improvement. In analyzing teachers' experiences and assessments of peer observation, we consider the professional norms that guided their interactions and the logistical challenges they encountered.

Methods

This paper is based on a qualitative, comparative case study embedded in a larger study, "Developing Human Capital Within Schools," conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. The larger study examines how six high-poverty, urban schools—all of which had received the state's highest accountability rating—attract, develop, and retain teachers. Here we focus on teachers' experiences of peer observation in schools.

Research Questions:

- 1) In six schools serving high-poverty students and judged to be successful according to state accountability ratings, how do teachers and administrators describe the purposes of peer observation in their schools?
- 2) In what ways are peer observation practices similar or different across schools?
- 3) How do teachers and principals assess peer observation practices in their schools?
- 4) What factors enabled or undermined the effective use of peer observation in those schools?

Sample of Schools

Our sample selection was guided by four principles. First, we sought a sample that included charter and district schools located in one city in Massachusetts. Second, we looked for schools that served high-poverty populations (where 70% or more of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and also enrolled high proportions of students of color. Third, we sought schools that were considered high-performing, having achieved the highest rating in the state's accountability system. Fourth, we sought schools that employed distinctive approaches to human capital development.

To attend to the first three principles, we examined publicly available demographic and student performance data. In seeking out schools that were having “success” with students with students from low-income families, we used the state's accountability ratings as a proxy for students' academic success. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MA DESE] rates every school on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 denoting the highest performing schools. The formula calculating a school's rating relies heavily on results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System [MCAS], the state's high stakes standardized test. The formula accounts for growth in student performance and the school's success in narrowing proficiency gaps among various subgroups of students, using a weighted average from the four most recent years of MCAS data. Although this definition of success is limited because it relies heavily on standardized test scores, it was the best proxy available for identifying schools that have a positive impact on students' academic outcomes. In addition, these ratings were used by the district and state to award and sanction schools and funders, school boards and the popular media monitored them carefully.

To attend to the fourth principle, we consulted our professional networks and considered available information about the approaches to human capital development used by specific schools and, in some cases, charter networks. Based on our initial inquiry, we drew up a proposed sample of six schools—all geographically located within the boundaries of one large urban school district, Walker City School District [WCSD].¹ The sample included three district schools (one traditional and two former turnaround) and three charter schools authorized by the state (including one restart of a failing district school). All schools were elementary and/or middle schools, which facilitated cross-site comparisons. To recruit schools, we contacted school officials explaining our study and requesting their participation. All six schools we approached agreed to participate in the study (For descriptive statistics for sample schools see Table 1 below). The purposive nature of our sample allowed us to conduct an in-depth, exploratory study of schools in a particular context. However, because the sample is small and deliberately chosen, we cannot generalize our findings beyond our sample.

Data Collection

Interviews. Between March and June 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 142 teachers, administrators and other staff in the six schools. Administrator interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and teacher interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. At most schools, all members of the research team were present for interviews with the principal and CMO director. In addition, all three researchers conducted interviews with teachers at each school. This facilitated cross-site comparisons, improved inter-rater reliability in coding data, and ensured that each research team member knew about each school's structures and culture.

¹ All names of schools, districts and individuals are pseudonyms.

We also purposively constructed our interview sample. At each school, we first interviewed administrators in order to understand both what processes they used to select, develop, and retain teachers and why they used them. Then, at each school, we recruited a sample of teachers, varying in demographics, teaching experience, preparation, and teaching assignment. We solicited teachers' participation in a variety of ways, including requests by email, flyers in teachers' mailboxes, and principals' recommendations. We also relied on recommendations from the teachers we interviewed about others in their school who might hold views different from their own. Teachers were promised confidentiality and anonymity as participants in the study. In addition, we interviewed other key staff members (e.g. curriculum coaches, program and family coordinators) when it became apparent that their work and views would inform our understanding of teachers' experiences.

In each school, the number of teachers we interviewed varied depending on the school size, the complexity of the organization and the practices used. We interviewed between 31% and 56% of the teachers at each school. (For descriptive statistics about the interviewees, see Appendix A). We used semi-structured protocols (Appendix B) to guide our interviews and ensure that data would be comparable across sites and across interviewers (Maxwell, 1996). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocols included several questions that allowed interviewees to discuss systems and processes related to school-based professional learning. Prior to the study, we did not expect to find peer observation practices in all of the schools, so we had not included a direct question about peer observation in our protocol. However, several of the questions led participants to discuss peer observation and the professional culture that supported its routines. We asked administrators what supports their schools provided for new and experienced teachers,

including supervision and evaluation, formal professional development [PD], and teacher collaboration. With administrators and teachers, we used follow-up questions to explore each of these and to identify other sources of support. In order to learn about how teachers assessed these experiences, we asked them to reflect on which of the opportunities that they discussed worked well for them and which did not. By interviewing teachers and school leaders about a range of strategies to develop human capital in their schools, we also sought to understand the connections among approaches within a school. Although this design, by definition, limits the depth of information we collected on any one topic, such as peer observation, it situates that practice among other strategies for developing human capital, allowing us to consider relationships among them in our analysis. In our visits to the schools, we also observed a wide range of day-to-day practices and looked for evidence of the school's organizational culture.

Document collection. Although interviews were the main source of data for this study, we also gathered many documents that describe school policies and programs related to recruiting, developing and retaining their teachers. The collected documents that informed analysis of interview data in this study included teacher handbooks, school policies, peer observation protocols, and peer observation forms used by teachers.

Data Analysis

After each interview we wrote detailed thematic summaries describing the participant and summarizing his or her views. First, we identified themes using *etic* codes drawn from the literature on the elements of developing human capital. Then, we used thematic summaries to analyze each site individually and to conduct cross-site comparisons, identifying common themes and differences. We used this analysis to supplement the *etic* codes with a list of *emic* codes that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, interviewees

reported on a range of opportunities for collaboration among teachers, which we had anticipated. It became evident that, although school leaders organized some of the opportunities for teachers to collaborate, teachers orchestrated other chances to work with peers. Based on our preliminary analysis we created two codes “FormalCollab” and “InformalCollab so that we could systematically attend to the differences between these types of interactions in our subsequent analysis. We then used this preliminary list of codes to review a small sub-set of the transcripts, individually and together, in order to calibrate our understanding and use of the codes, as well as to refine the list and definitions. We repeated this process twice in order to finalize the list of codes and to improve inter-rater reliability. We then thematically coded each transcribed interview using the software, Dedoose (For a list of codes see Appendix C).

After coding all interviews, we engaged in an iterative analytic process, using data-analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to address our emerging research questions about peer observations. We relied on Dedoose’s function that allowed me to sort data by codes and by particular characteristics of interviewees to investigate my research questions. We analyzed the data for each school separately completing a data analytic matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that showed the components of peer observation at each school. We then reviewed school documents such as peer observation protocols and peer observation forms for additional information about these processes at each school. After establishing a clear understanding of the different opportunities for peer observation at each school, we created a cross-school matrix, to allow us to consider similarities and differences in teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives within and across schools. Finally, we wrote an analytic memo comparing peer observation practices at the six schools in order to discern patterns in the data about how teachers and administrators experienced and assessed these practices.

We used several strategies to address risks to validity. Throughout the process, we returned to the data to review our coding and check my emerging conclusions, seeking rival explanations or disconfirming data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We also shared analytic memos, outlines, and drafts with members of the research team, and colleagues who are familiar with this line of research but not involved in this research project so that they might offer alternative interpretations of the data.

The Schools and Their Varying Context

The schools in this study are similar in several respects but quite different in others. A brief discussion of their histories and policy requirements provides contextual information that informs the subsequent analysis and discussion.

The Charter Schools

Naylor Charter School and *Rodriguez Charter School* were well-established state-authorized charter schools that opened their doors ten and twenty years earlier, respectively, to serve elementary and middle school students from the area. Both were freestanding entities at their inception, although Naylor later became one of three schools in the Naylor Charter Network. As charter schools, they were completely free of all local district policies and received public funding through the state, rather than directly from the school district.

Kincaid Charter School had been selected by the district and authorized by the state to “restart” a failing WCSD middle school in 2011, three years prior to this study. Kincaid administrators recruited more than 80% of the students who had been enrolled by the traditional school before the restart, more students than typically returned to the school each year under the prior administration. School officials promised, and Kincaid delivered, significant and rapid gains in student test scores. In accordance with the requirements for restarting a school, Kincaid

invited current teachers from the school to apply for positions in the new charter school; however, very few applied and no one who did was asked to return. When Kincaid re-opened, all teachers and staff were new to the school. As an in-district charter, the WCSD teachers union represented Kincaid's teachers. The school had been granted exceptions from the WCSD teachers contract, giving them extensive autonomy to define teachers' working conditions. In addition, Kincaid Network and school leaders had autonomy over their budget, curriculum and assessments as defined in their charter with the state.

The District Schools

Dickinson Elementary School was a century-old district school that served a largely immigrant community, most from the school's surrounding neighborhood. In recent years, the district and the state recognized Dickinson for growth in students' MCAS scores. Historically, the school had experienced very little teacher turnover; many teachers we interviewed there talked about having waited for years to apply for an opening at Dickinson. In fact, when we conducted our study, over half of their teachers had worked at the school for more than 20 years. The WCSD teachers union also represented Dickinson's teachers, and the school was bound by the WCSD collective bargaining agreement, as well as other state and district policies.

Hurston K-8 School and *Fitzgerald Elementary School*, also part of WCSD, had histories that differed substantially from Dickinson's. The state had placed both in turnaround status as chronically underperforming schools four years prior to the study. At the beginning of the "turnaround" process, they were required by the state to replace at least 50% of the existing faculty and the principal. After a process of reviewing the performance of current teachers, Hurston's new principal replaced about 80% of the school's teachers and Fitzgerald's replaced about 65%. In subsequent years, both schools demonstrated substantial growth on state

standardized tests, allowing them to exit turnaround status, each in three years. Although school leaders and teachers at both schools were proud of this accomplishment, they were also forthcoming about the need for continuing improvement.

After exiting turnaround status, both Hurston and Fitzgerald had, with support from their teachers, requested and received significant exceptions to district policies in order to continue their reform efforts after exiting turnaround status. For example, both schools were granted autonomy in hiring and budget, as well as flexibility in scheduling teachers' time, additional PD hours, extended learning time for students and decision rights regarding curriculum and assessments.

Table 1. *Selected Characteristics of Six Sample Schools*

School Name	School Type	Grades	Estimated Enrollment	% Low-income students	% African American or Black Students	% Hispanic or Latino Students	% Other Non-white students	% White Students
Dickinson Elementary	Traditional District	PK-5	370	76	4	85	2	9
Fitzgerald Elementary	District - Former Turnaround	PK-5	390	85	70	25	3	2
Hurston K-8	District - Former Turnaround	PK-8	800	75	41	54	4	1
Kincaid Charter Middle	Charter – Restart of District School	6-8	475	88	50	30	10	10
Naylor Charter K-8	Charter	K-8	500	82	70	24	5	1
Rodriguez Charter K1-8	Charter	PK-8	420	72	55	20	7	18

*Percentages are approximated for confidentiality purposes.

Findings

It was striking that all six schools in this sample were implementing a range of peer observation processes. Although norms of privacy among teachers in American schools (Little, 1990) and traditional organizational structures (Bird & Little, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Tyack, 1974) often serve to discourage them from visiting their colleagues' classes, many teachers in these schools welcomed opportunities to observe others' teaching, and in some cases to be observed. Teachers and administrators viewed peer observation as providing a chance to get what one teacher called "good ideas," see specific instructional strategies in action, and get feedback on their own teaching.

Peer observation was embedded in other systems and structures that promoted collaboration among teachers in all of these schools. Across the sample, teachers described their schools as organizations where teachers frequently discussed learning and teaching with colleagues and relied on one another to respond to the challenges of their daily work. Many would have agreed with one teacher who said, "I'm not allowed to [be] an island here."

The extent to which these schools had developed their systems for peer observation varied across schools. This variation was evident in the purpose, procedures, and support for teachers in implementing the processes, as well as the degree to which peer observation was integrated with other professional learning. In the schools with the most developed peer observation processes—Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter, and Rodriguez Charter Middle School—principals and other administrators encouraged or required the practice from year to year and teachers consistently welcomed the opportunity to observe and be observed by colleagues. The other schools—Hurston K-8, Fitzgerald, Dickinson, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary—were investing in a range of peer observation practices but they faced logistical and

cultural challenges that made it difficult to sustain them. Notably, across all six schools, teachers and administrators viewed peer observation as having great potential and they hoped to continue this practice in the future.

In what follows, we analyze the schools' varying approaches to peer observation, situating them in their particular organizational context and identifying how they addressed logistical and cultural barriers to this practice. We also present teachers' perspectives on peer observation, which varied from school to school and in some cases within schools. We highlight how the strategic use of video technology helped several schools address the challenges of implementing peer observations.

Highly Developed Systems for Peer Observation

At Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and the middle school grades at Rodriguez Charter School (which here we refer to as Rodriguez Charter Middle School), teachers viewed peer observation as a routine and valuable part of their professional learning. However, their organizational contexts varied. At Naylor and Kincaid, highly developed peer observation systems were an outgrowth of organizational structures that required interdependence among teachers in their daily work. The organizational structures at Rodriguez Middle School were more traditional; nonetheless, administrators placed a high priority on teachers observing each other frequently. The elementary and middle grades at Rodriguez Charter operated as a single organization in many respects, however the principals of each unit approached peer observation differently and therefore are discussed separately in this analysis.

Schools were designed to require interdependence among teachers. Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter were, from their inception, designed to promote high levels of collaboration, fundamentally altering traditional relationships among teachers and boundaries between

classrooms. The image of a single teacher working largely in isolation with a group of students was not evident in these schools. Instead, many teachers shared classrooms, office space, students and lesson plans with colleagues in their grade level and content area. Taken together, these organizational structures created an environment in which teachers expected their practice to be viewed and examined regularly by colleagues.

Shared lesson plans. At Kincaid Charter and Naylor Charter, teachers were required to split the responsibility for creating lesson plans with colleagues on their team, which meant they all taught from some lesson plans written by peers. For example, at Kincaid a team of math teachers would plan a unit together and then divide up the allocated lessons within that unit for individual team members to plan. At both schools, teachers collaboratively critiqued lesson plans before and after implementing them, and then archived them on-line for future revision and use.

Co-teaching. Teachers at Kincaid Charter and Naylor Charter were often present when their colleagues were teaching because many special education and English Language Learning teachers co-taught classes with general education teachers. Teachers talked about these relationships as another source of informal collegial feedback and support. For example, a teacher at Kincaid told us that right after class she might approach her co-teacher and say, “What went wrong there?” She remarked that they “give each other feedback pretty often.”

In addition, both schools had cohorts of full-time Teacher Trainees [TTs] who shared classrooms and responsibilities with one or more teachers. Not surprisingly, TTs were observed by their mentors and regularly received feedback. In turn, TTs routinely observed their mentor and other teachers in the school and were expected to provide feedback to any teacher they observed. Many of the current teachers in these two schools had once been TTs and were therefore accustomed to frequent observation and feedback. In addition, the presence of TTs in

the classrooms, observing and critiquing others, contributed to a professional culture in which peer observations were the norm.

Shared space and shared students. Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter also used space in ways that encouraged them to collaborate and observe each other. At Naylor, pairs of middle school teachers (one teaching ELA/history and the other math/science) shared a classroom and a group of students. They were regularly present for each other's teaching, which often led to impromptu observations and feedback. One teacher explained, "My co-teacher and I talk about how it feels...it's a family dynamic, almost, for better or worse. ... We're all around each other." Another appreciated receiving impromptu feedback on classroom management from her colleague who shared the classroom and students with her. "She was in the classroom at her desk, like grading or ... planning, when I was teaching and she'd [say], 'you know if at the beginning of class you just give them the [warning]—that's it. They know better, right?'"

At Kincaid Charter, where teachers moved from room to room while students remained in the same space throughout the day, teachers had desks in a shared office space with others at their grade level. Many said this was a setting for ongoing informal collaboration. A teacher at Kincaid explained how these structures created a sense of interdependence and collective responsibility. She explained that in other schools, "you have your classroom with your kids and they're only your kids when they're in that classroom. You're not worried about what anyone else is doing, even in your own curriculum, content area." She said that Kincaid was a place where teachers depended on one another due to shared lesson plans and other organizational structures that promoted a sense of collective responsibility. Formal peer observation processes were a logical complement to the organizational structures that defined these schools.

More traditional school structures: Rodriguez Charter Middle School. Rodriguez Middle School was in many ways more traditional than Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter. Teachers did not share the same space, teach from the same lessons or co-teach regularly. They did, as in most middle schools, share students, since each taught a particular subject. In addition, Rodriguez also had TTs in many middle school classrooms. Middle school teachers met weekly during PD sessions and peer observation was an integrated part of their professional learning experience.

Implemented various forms of peer observation. Beyond the incidental observations that occurred due to shared spaces and co-teaching, school leaders at Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Rodriguez Charter Middle also organized ways for teachers to formally observe their colleagues as they taught.. At Naylor, teachers were assigned an observation partner for each trimester and were expected to observe each other once every three weeks. Rodriguez teachers were required to observe at least four colleagues per year, chosen through a randomized process conducted during a PD session. In both schools, teachers were provided a structured protocol including a “feedback sheet” for taking notes. According to Principal North at Naylor, early in the year administrators might require teachers to observe for a particular topic that they were working on in PD, but late in the school year peer observations were open-ended. At Rodriguez, teachers identified an area of practice that they wanted their colleague to focus on for the visit. In both schools, the observations were conducted during teachers’ “free time [or] our prep time,” as one teacher explained to us, and were followed with a required debrief during weekly PD time. During the debrief, Naylor and Rodriguez Middle School teachers were expected to provide their colleague with feedback and collaboratively reflect on their observations.

At Naylor, teachers also were involved in Lesson Study, “a Japanese form of professional development that centers on teachers coming together to examine their practice by planning and trying out lessons” (Fernandez, 2005, p. 265). At the time of the study, teachers had just started a Lesson Study cycle, which involved a group of four or five teachers planning a lesson together and then having that team plus members of other groups come to watch instruction using the lesson plan.

Principal Ryan also arranged in-person peer observations designed to provide teachers with models of specific instructional strategies. Periodically, he took middle school teachers on small-scale learning walks focused on a particular topic such as routines for the beginning of class. He provided an example of what he might say to teachers: “Let’s just go on a walk around for ten minutes and see how beginning-of-class routines are starting here.” At other times, he suggested that a teacher visit a colleague with a specific observational purpose.

The most common form of peer observation in these schools was video observation, which was one step removed from a classroom visit. Naylor, Kincaid and Rodriguez Middle School administrators frequently used video recordings of their teachers’ instruction during weekly PD sessions. This practice created frequent, targeted opportunities for teachers to see their colleagues teaching, analyze their instructional practices and provide feedback to each other. Often, school leaders collected videos that illustrated specific elements of pedagogy that were the focus of a PD session. Principal Ryan at Rodriguez explained, “When I was doing [a session] about a discrete, specific instructional techniques, I was videoing them doing [the techniques] and then showing them to all of them so we could debrief and see models.” A teacher at Naylor Charter described how a PD session might focus on “turn and talks” or “rigor” and the meeting would include observation and collaborative debrief of teachers’ videos with a

focus on this “very specific aspect” of instruction. Many teachers at all three schools offered examples, citing a range of instructional practices they had explored in part through video analysis. Therefore, in these three schools, teachers frequently observed their peers formally and informally, and teachers and administrators considered this as an ongoing element of their professional learning repertoire.

Teachers valued peer observation processes. Teachers at Naylor, Kincaid and Rodriguez Middle embraced peer observation as a valuable process for learning from colleagues. Teachers across these schools explained that they often learned more by seeing practices in action than by just talking or reading about them. A Kincaid teacher explained the benefits of informal, in-person visits. “We can walk in while teachers are teaching, and observe them, which I think is even more powerful because you can see great teaching in action. You can take notes on what’s effective.” Teachers expressed similar enthusiasm for other types of observations. Many, like this Naylor teacher, spoke positively about the benefits of video observations. “You get so many good ideas because, even if it’s not my grade level, I can just see other things that people do.” A colleague described an upcoming Lesson Study observation. “It’s actually one of my classes, which I’m very excited about... [T]eachers are going to sit in when that lesson is taught and then provide feedback.”

A few of the most experienced teachers had ideas about ways to improve their learning through peer observation. They expressed concerns when partnered with novice teachers from whom they had less to learn and hoped in some of their peer observations to be paired with experienced colleagues who would challenge them. Nonetheless, teachers’ assessments of peer observation were overwhelmingly positive in these schools.

Structure and support reduced barriers to implementation. At Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter, and Rodriguez Charter Middle, administrators reduced the likelihood of logistical and cultural barriers by providing teachers with structures and support for peer observations and integrating them into their ongoing professional learning. In all three schools, the peer observation practices incorporated peer feedback, which some might assume would pose a greater threat to teachers than having a colleague visit without sharing their responses; but teachers did not raise concerns about this. In fact, they spoke quite casually about peer observation processes, describing them as a standard part of their professional learning. For example, an experienced teacher in her seventh year at Rodriguez Middle said, “You [shared] what you saw. . . . It was very open, so everyone was able to kind of just learn from each other.” An equally experienced colleague explained,

It’s sort of part of our practice. It’s like, “This is what you should be doing as learning, observing all of these teachers that you work with.” We’re given time to do so. You have a form you fill out and then you debrief with the teacher. You just go back and forth about what you saw.

In these schools teachers were accustomed to their “practices becom[ing] more publicly known and publicly considered” (Little, 1990, p. 521). Notably, administrators in all three schools observed teachers and provided feedback about twice a month, which also contributed to shaping this professional culture and confronting the norm of privacy.

By devoting time during whole school PD sessions, school leaders further reduced the potential barriers to peer observation. They not only demonstrated their commitment to the process, but also provided teachers with time to complete most of its elements. The fact that observation debriefs occurred during PD ensured that teachers were engaged in the process. Importantly, this also provided teachers a structured and supportive environment in which to regularly practice and refine their skills for observing, analyzing and debriefing learning and

teaching. When teachers observed each other in person, which could not occur during PD sessions, the full-time TTs routinely assumed full responsibility for teaching a class when the regular teacher was not present, thus facilitating classroom visits.

Peer Observation as a Short-Term Initiative

At Hurston K-8, Fitzgerald, Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter Elementary, school leaders had implemented a range of peer observation practices in recent years, but these practices were not stable; nor were they integrated with other elements of teachers' professional learning at the time of the study. Nonetheless, teachers and administrators in these schools spoke of peer observation as having great potential for improving teaching by allowing teachers to share expertise and experience across classrooms. Dickinson's Principal Davila repeatedly talked about her belief that teachers "need to learn from one another." Having been a teacher for 20 years before becoming a principal, she spoke from experience: "Teaching is such an isolated job. ... You are in this classroom. You're all alone." As she and her counterparts at Hurston, Fitzgerald, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary sought to combat the isolation of teaching in traditional schools, they relied on peer observation as one of their tactics. In these schools, most peer observation practices focused on the observers' learning and rarely included feedback for the observed teacher.

Like Rodriguez Charter Middle, these schools' instructional programs were typical of many other US public schools. Most adults taught a group of students on their own within the confines of a single classroom. These schools had a much larger proportion of veteran teachers than Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter, and many of them had worked in a range of other schools before their current position. (See Appendix B for more information about interviewees' years of experience.) However, these schools had many systems and structures to promote

interdependence among teachers, including weekly team meetings, where teachers collaboratively analyzed and responded to student data, and in some schools developed and revised shared lesson plans. From the teachers' perspective, peer observation arguably was the most invasive of the collaborative practices they implemented. Notably, teachers responded differently to peer observation across schools and, in some cases, within schools.

Peer observation routines varied. At Hurston K-8, Fitzgerald, Dickinson, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary school leaders organized a range of peer observation practices intended to support improvements in teaching quality. Hurston K-8, Dickinson, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary each had paired teachers for peer observations, but had done so with different purposes. At Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter, the purpose was explicitly and exclusively to support the observer's learning. Many teachers at Dickinson agreed with a colleague who said, "You're not really there to critique. ... You're going in with a ... purpose for you, that you want to learn about." The pre-observation prompt for teachers at Rodriguez Elementary highlighted this intention; "What do I want to explore/ think about/ learn about my own teaching practice?" "What will I look for that will help answer my question?" In contrast, at Hurston, the goal, as described in a formal grant application, was to enable "teachers to work with several different colleagues to provide and receive feedback and suggestions for improving instruction."

In order to address these various purposes, the three schools designed different peer observation opportunities. At Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter Elementary, teachers could request three or four people whom they wished to observe over the course of the year. However, the teacher an individual chose to observe did not necessarily reciprocate, since the focus was, as one teacher said, on "getting good ideas." A Dickinson teacher explained that she requested to

see a colleague who had the reputation of being “outstanding in Writer’s Workshop and I really wanted to get some ideas.” At Dickinson, the observing teachers were asked to anonymously complete a form with their reflections about their learning. Participation was voluntary at Dickinson, whereas at Rodriguez Charter Elementary it had been required during some years and was voluntary in others.

At Hurston K-8, where teachers were expected to provide feedback to colleagues, the process was more defined. A teacher leader organized peer observations, pairing teachers within and across departments and grade levels. Teachers received a printed protocol, which called for a pre-observation conference, in-person observation, and a post-observation debrief, all focused on an instructional challenge identified by the observed teacher. Teachers were encouraged, but not required, to name one of the goals they had defined for their teacher evaluation process as their focus for peer observations. The pre-conferences, observations and debrief meetings were scheduled by teachers on their own time.

In these schools, some peer observations were intentionally focused on particular instructional strategies. Teachers at Fitzgerald and Rodriguez Charter described administrators and instructional coaches orchestrating targeted, periodic visits among colleagues. A Fitzgerald teacher gave an example of the instructional coach bringing a colleague into her room to watch her present a math topic that the visiting teacher was struggling with:

The instructional coach who saw me teach it a few times came in with her to observe the way that I did it. How did I execute my lesson? The vocabulary. What did I allow the kids to do? They turn and talk. The group work.

These visits were primarily focused on the observers’ learning although this teacher reported that sometimes the two teachers and the coach or administrator debriefed the observation.

Using a different approach, teacher leaders at Fitzgerald facilitated non-evaluative peer learning walks. All teachers were both observed and were observed by their colleagues, focusing on how they promoted higher order thinking skills, which was their school-wide PD focus. A teacher with seven years of experience explained, “We would do three or four learning walks every year, where you just get to go have a non-evaluative look at your peers and pick up on best practices and things of that nature.” In their application for policy exceptions after exiting turnaround status, Fitzgerald’s educators described the purpose of the learning walks.

This has been a powerful strategy for creating a shared understanding of what is happening in our school as opposed to hearing it from external observers. It has also been an opportunity for teachers to see examples of excellent teaching and learning so that they know it is possible here.

At the time we collected data, Dickinson teachers reported on their first experience using videos of some of their teachers’ instruction during PD sessions. This also was their first organized experience with providing feedback to colleagues. Teacher leaders planned and facilitated a session about “close reading,” an element of the CCSS for which three teachers agreed to be videoed. The faculty watched and discussed these videos of teachers leading “close reading” with their students. One of the teachers who had agreed to be recorded recalled how they had explained the activity to their peers, “We are not showing you things because we think that we’re so good at it. We’re showing you this because we want to talk about how it went and what we can do and learn from it.”

Mixed views within and across schools. Teachers in these four schools responded to peer observation in varied ways that reveal the cultural and logistical barriers they confronted. Although few teachers at Fitzgerald even spoke of the peer observation at their school, many teachers at Hurston, Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter Elementary spontaneously offered accounts of their experiences. It is likely that the lack of commentary at Fitzgerald indicated that

peer observations were no longer a prominent element of their professional learning experience, although we did not learn why that was the case.

Rodriguez teachers were open to peer observations. Teachers at Rodriguez Charter Elementary said that peer observations provided an opportunity to improve their own instructional practice. For example, one teacher said that he needed additional support in order to implement project-based learning in his classroom. He recalled approaching Principal Rega and saying, “I get it but can I go somewhere and see some schools that are doing this type of teaching?” Rega agreed and arranged a visit to another school, which the teacher described as “super helpful.” It changed his mind about what “he could be doing and how he could be teaching.” Teachers at Rodriguez viewed their colleagues as a resource and peer observation as a way to access each other’s expertise. A teacher who had taught at Rodriguez Elementary for ten years explained, “I would say that the quality of teachers that are here is really high and I think that we’ve all learned more from watching and planning with each other than you could going to PDs and things.” Interviewees throughout the lower school consistently described peer observation as a welcomed and helpful learning opportunity.

Dickinson’s teachers were nervous but hopeful. At Dickinson, teachers widely praised peer observation as providing an opportunity to learn from colleagues, but they were also nervous about how the process seemed to test the limits of norms of privacy and autonomy (Little, 1990). A teacher in her eighth year at Dickinson said the peer observation process had been “really powerful.” She continued, “I feel like you get so much out of it. You get so much from the teaching, but even the classroom set up, the desks or the grouping.” Although many teachers expressed this sentiment, some also suggested that certain boundaries should be respect. One teacher said that the teacher leadership team was discussing the idea of including debrief

meetings after future in-person peer observations, but that some teachers suggested that might not work. One explained, “Some teachers wouldn’t be comfortable with that... because it is difficult to hear criticism, especially if it’s not expressed in the nicest of ways, so I don’t know how that would actually play out.” Another teacher said that she thought it was important that their process was focused on the observer’s learning and not feedback to the observed teacher. “... Because if it wasn’t like that and you just felt like people were coming in to watch you, it’d be weird.”

In contrast, teachers’ reactions were consistently positive and enthusiastic to Dickinson’s recent PD session in which they used a video recorded class followed by a facilitated debrief with the teacher who had been filmed. This suggests that norms of privacy could shift in response to structured routines and protocols that make teaching open to collegial analysis and discussion. When teachers discussed this recent new approach, they used words such as “authentic” and “valuable.” Some teachers described these sessions as the best PD of the year. The teachers who volunteered to be videoed discussed their experience of having the whole faculty watch them teach and provide feedback. One said, “It was a little intimidating at first, but after the feedback, we felt better. Then the second time we felt even better.” Another teacher described it as “nerve-wracking” but worthwhile. “It was really nice and they appreciated it because it was so authentic.” She said that “everyone was really so supportive and kind in their feedback.” Although positive, their somewhat ambivalent accounts contrasted with the matter-of-fact ways in which Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter, and Rodriguez Charter Middle teachers described watching videos of colleagues teaching during PD sessions. The fact that initial attempts to use video at Dickinson were much discussed, sometimes with mixed feelings, also suggested that professional norms at their school were evolving.

Hurston teachers had conflicting views. At Hurston K-8, teachers' views of peer observation varied widely, as reflected in responses to an anonymous, annual survey asking teachers to assess the process. Although at least three quarters of the teachers agreed that participating in peer observation had helped them to develop professionally, their specific comments revealed more mixed responses to the practice. One teacher commented that the process works better when there is a "pre-existing relationship with their partner" which they suggested provided a "high level of trust." Another said that the process "should be voluntary" and another that "it is better to observe than being observed." However, other teachers reported welcoming feedback from peers: "I wish I were observed more;" "Really like time to collegially discuss practice;" and "We are developing a great give and take."

The mixed opinions expressed on the survey were consistent with what we heard from teachers in interviews. One teacher said she was comfortable having people in and out of her room to observe, but said "My content partner, it gives her heart palpitations, but she just doesn't like anybody in her class. She'd get nervous if I [said], 'I'm in for observing.' She just doesn't like that. ...I think it's just personal preference." Teachers at Hurston K-8 had varying expectations about the extent to which teachers should examine each other's professional practice. The teacher leader who organized the peer observation initiative did not believe peer observation had yet become "part of the culture" except in some "pockets," such as with "a few teachers who come from charter schools" and maybe some "primary grade teachers."

Addressing or surrendering to cultural and logistical barriers. Each of the schools attempted to address cultural and logistical challenges in structuring their peer observation practices. However, these barriers persisted to varying degrees, challenging whether the practice was sustainable in these schools. In fact, in all four schools, the primary peer observation

initiatives, partner observations and learning walks, were not being implemented during the year of this study. At three of the schools—Dickinson, Rodriguez Charter Elementary and Hurston K-8—teachers and administrators talked at length about their past practice and discussed their hopes to continue the routines or develop alternative opportunities for peer observations. In these schools there were also several examples of teachers independently orchestrating peer observations despite the current lack of school-wide structures. At Fitzgerald some sporadic opportunities for peer observation continued at the time of the study, but there was no indication that the principal planned to reinstate a systematic school wide practice in the near future.

Attempting to minimize cultural obstacles. Dickinson teachers and Principal Davila believed that in-person peer observations were more comfortable for teachers when the visiting teacher provided no feedback to the observed teacher. It is possible that this assumption grew out of traditional norms of non-interference among teachers (Little, 1990). However, the fact that teachers responded positively to the video observations, which included feedback about the teachers' instruction, raises the possibility that the lack of debrief for the in-person observations actually created more uncertainty than protection. For when teachers visited a colleague's class in person at Dickinson their perspectives on what they saw remained undiscussed with the person they observed, which may have been more unnerving than they realized.

Hurston's teacher leaders attempted to support teachers in crossing traditional boundaries through peer observation by prescribing protocols for the process. Expectations for peer observation were introduced at a whole school PD session intended to prepare teachers for conducting productive peer observations. Teacher leaders guided their colleagues to collect "low-inference data" when observing in a peer's class, saying both in person and on a handout that, as an observer, a teacher was supposed to be "the cameraman, not the commentator," They

theorized that non-judgmental data could support a reflective discussion after the visit without teachers feeling defensive about the feedback they might receive. However, beyond the initial PD session, teachers were paired with a colleague and expected to independently carry out the process, with only the support of printed forms. It was the teachers' responsibility to adhere to the protocols. However, since they were only interacting with their observation partner, there may have been wide variation in how these protocols were implemented. One teacher suggested that they needed "more time to practice the process" while another said, "not all teachers understand the value of low-inference data." Another way that teacher leaders tried to reduce anxiety about being observed was to let teachers define the instructional focus for the feedback they would receive. The potential trade-off of allowing teachers to identify the focus was that the process was not systematically connected to other professional learning and, therefore, could easily be peripheral for many teachers. Based on teachers' assessments of peer observations at Hurston K-8, these structures did not resolve concerns for all teachers.

Rodriguez Charter teachers seemed comfortable with watching colleagues teach and being observed by others. Their peer observation practices did not include feedback, but teachers did not offer a rationale for why, as teachers did at Dickinson. Instead, Rodriguez teachers spoke of working in an environment where classroom doors were "open" and administrators, colleagues, and others visited frequently. Teachers and administrators knew that this was not typical of all schools and required adjustment, especially among experienced teachers. A teacher who had been at Rodriguez for ten years recalled that when she taught in another district she could "count on one hand how many times someone came in [her] classroom" during her two years there. Initially at Rodriguez, she found the steady flow of visitors in her room unsettling. "It was really nerve-wracking until I just realized that's the culture of the school." She explained

that she often talks to new teachers about this aspect of the culture saying things such as, “Look, people are going to be in your room day in and day out. You might know them. You might not know them. They might write things down. They might not. You’re just going get used to it, you really are. . . . That’s just the culture of the school.” This sort of response did not seem to be the result of specific procedures used for peer observation but rather from the expectations of a tight-knit professional community with expectations for teachers to work together in the interest of student learning. Teachers described their colleagues as skillful educators working toward shared goals.

Limited success in overcoming logistical obstacles. Teachers and administrators in these schools, acknowledged the challenge of allocating time and resources to support peer observation. At Dickinson and Rodriguez Charter Elementary, the principals provided substitutes to cover classes when teachers observed. At Rodriguez, the presences of TTs and a permanent full-time substitute made this possible. However, Dickinson’s Principal Davila worried about having sufficient funding to continue using substitute teachers for this purpose in the future. Hurston K-8 was unable to provide substitute coverage, which was not surprising given the large size of the faculty. Many Hurston teachers explained that without substitute coverage or allocated time for observations and debriefs, the practices were difficult to maintain. Teachers variously mentioned that “coverage was not available” and that it was “difficult to meet so often.” Teachers did not want to miss time with their own students in order to observe someone else. In fact, many teachers reported that it was common for teachers to complete fewer observations than expected.

In addition, peer observation competed with other initiatives for time and attention. Davila explained that, during the year of the study, a focus on data inquiry cycles at Dickinson

had “distracted them” from allocating the necessary resources to support peer observations. Principal Hinds reported, “People really liked it, and then it fell apart.” He added that “it was great for two years, but ...we failed to do our part” to keep it going. The year of the study, the teacher who had organized the initiative during the prior two years had a new teacher leadership assignment to lead data and curriculum work with a team of upper elementary teachers; as a result, no one was in charge of promoting and organizing peer observation. At Hurston, it was difficult to discern if accounts of logistical challenges also masked cultural concerns.

The primary limitation cited by interviewees at Rodriguez Charter Elementary was the demand that peer observation placed on teachers’ time. Most Rodriguez Elementary teachers talked at length about managing their extensive professional responsibilities. One explained, “We are a tired group sometimes. Working at that level ...at that pace... it’s exhausting.” Principal Rega worried about over-taxing her teachers and therefore made peer observation voluntary some years, as she had at the time of this study. Therefore, at four of six schools in this study—Dickinson, Fitzgerald, Hurston K-8, and Rodriguez Charter Elementary—peer observation was not yet an integrated, ongoing element of the schools’ approach to professional learning, despite wide praise and optimism about its potential.

Video Technology Reduced Barriers to Peer Observation

Video technology allowed educators in schools with both traditional and non-traditional structures to reduce logistical and cultural barriers to peer observation. By using video, teachers could see each other at work without sacrificing instructional time in their own class. Video technology provided an answer to the problem of scheduling and substitute coverage. It also allowed school and teacher leaders to strategically integrate peer observation with other professional learning experiences. According to teachers, this contributed to the strength of the

PD sessions and also ensured that peer observations were relevant and integral rather than a peripheral, add-on experience.

Videos also assisted leaders in providing teachers with transitional experiences between isolation and co-teaching. It is possible that sharing a video of one's teaching with a colleague is less nerve-wracking and less distracting than having that person present during teaching. Also, the teacher may be reassured by the fact that, if the class went poorly, he or she could delete the recording and film again. In addition, video allows school leaders, coaches and teacher leaders to facilitate peer observations and debriefs during PD sessions, modeling the process for teachers and exerting greater control over how they participated. . In this sample, school leaders recognized that they needed to develop teachers' observational skills as well as their ability to provide productive feedback, if peer observations were to contribute to teachers' learning. Collaborative video observations allowed for this to happen, since leaders could provide or solicit commentary on the peer observation process, allowing teachers to reflect on and improve their skills as observers and analysts of learning and teaching. In these ways, school leaders could provide teachers with ongoing structure and support for peer observation. Finally, by engaging in large group discussions of video observations of peers, teachers and school leaders could engage in continuing conversations about instructional practice, potentially working toward agreements about effective teaching for all.

Conclusions and Discussion

A plethora of reform efforts aim to support improvements in instructional practice and to reduce variation in teaching quality across classrooms within schools. It is widely known that a student's experience from one year to the next, or even from teacher to teacher within the same year, can differ dramatically based on variations in teaching quality (Rivkin et al., 2005;

Rockoff, 2004). Scholars and practitioners offer different explanations for why that is so; lack of agreement among teachers about instructional goals, differing levels of experience and expertise, and lack of opportunities to learn new professional skills. When teachers are confined to their own classroom, by choice or by design, they typically do not know what or how their colleagues teach. Even when teachers participate in routines that encourage dialogue about learning and teaching, such as during sessions dedicated to data analysis, they often avoid deep discussion of instructional problems (Little, 2007; Little et al., 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2005). There is certainly no guarantee that peer observation will lead to improvements in teaching or reduce variation in teaching quality, but it seems likely that it can provide greater awareness among teachers of their colleagues' work. Teachers in this study attest to the fact that watching fellow teachers in action contributed to their learning in ways that discussion without observations could not.

School leaders and teachers in this sample demonstrated a strong commitment to working collaboratively so that they could address the pressing needs of their students. They hired teachers who were interested in working closely with colleagues and designed structures and systems that compelled teachers to rely on one another. They also created frequent opportunities for peers and administrators to analyze each other's work. These schools were systematically challenging the conventional norms of privacy, autonomy and non-interference (Little, 1990).

In keeping with these efforts, all six schools provided a range of peer observation opportunities serving various purposes. Although teachers' responses generally were very positive, they differed across and within schools. At Naylor Charter and Kincaid Charter, non-traditional school structures fostered an environment in which teachers expected colleagues to observe their practice regularly, both incidentally and through structured peer observations. At

Rodriguez Charter Middle, a more traditional school setting, the principal created systems for ongoing collaboration, including peer observation. Teachers in these schools saw peer observation, which included providing colleagues feedback on their instruction, as a productive and routine component of their professional learning.

At the other schools—Dickinson, Fitzgerald, Hurston K-8 and Rodriguez Charter Elementary School—peer observation was a short-term initiative that was not fully integrated with other opportunities for teachers’ professional learning. Many teachers appreciated the opportunity to watch their peers in action, but administrators (and therefore teachers) had difficulty sustaining the practice from one year to the next. It appears that in some of these schools, conventional norms of privacy and autonomy persisted, even in the presence of modest structures intended to promote collaboration. In most cases, peer observation processes in these schools did not include providing feedback to teachers. Ironically, in the schools where the practice was designed to be less threatening to observed teachers because feedback was not included, the process was not consistently maintained. Notably, compared to Naylor Charter, Kincaid Charter and Rodriguez Charter Middle, teachers in the district schools were provided less support to build their skills for observing and analyzing other teachers’ instructional practice and in most cases the processes were loosely defined, all of which may have contributed to greater uncertainty for teachers. In addition, these schools struggled with the logistical challenges of implementing peer observations. Importantly, despite the barriers, teachers’ views of peer observation practices were generally very positive and many hoped for opportunities to participate in peer observations in the future.

These cases highlight approaches to peer observation that schools might use to increase teachers’ opportunities to observe colleagues’ instructional practice and begin to replace

traditional norms of privacy and autonomy with new norms of collaboration and shared work. Teachers and school leaders alike were optimistic about the potential for peer observations to support teachers' learning when it was strategically incorporated into teachers' ongoing professional learning.

Implications for Practice

In order to make peer observation sustainable, schools should consider developing structures that build observation into teachers' daily work so that it is integral, rather than an add-on to their existing responsibilities. Reformers and practitioners will benefit from designing systems that provide on-going structure and support for teachers as they learn to interact in new ways. In order to do this, school leaders can use scheduled times such as team meetings and professional development sessions for peer observation practices as Dickinson did. Video observations are a powerful tool to use in developing teachers' skills for observation, analysis and debriefing with peers. In addition, by using video observations regularly, school leaders can provide teachers with frequent, relevant peer observation experiences that present fewer cultural and logistical challenges. Principals and teacher leaders are more likely to develop routines that have impact and are sustainable if they integrate various types of peer observations with other professional activities.

Implications for Policy

Several of the schools in this sample benefitted from having the resources and autonomy to adjust teachers' schedules. This allowed them to designate more time for professional development than is typically available in U.S. schools. Each of the charter schools had weekly after-school professional development sessions, which contributed to well developed systems for job-embedded professional learning for teachers. Fitzgerald and Hurston K-8, through policy

exemptions granted during and after turnaround, had more time for teacher meetings and professional development than the WCSD teachers contract provided for teachers in traditional district schools, such as Dickinson. At the time of the study, Fitzgerald and Hurston were not using this time to support peer observation, although they had in the past. It was evident that schools in this sample could more readily implement and sustain peer observation practices when they had ample, designated time to collaborate with colleagues in structured environments, and where school leaders, teacher leaders and instructional coaches could support their efforts. With sufficient time, school leaders and teacher leaders can plan ways to incorporate peer observations into ongoing opportunities for professional learning.

Implications For Future Research

Future research is needed to examine the systems and structures used to implement and support peer observation and to better understand teachers' responses to the processes. If there is promise in the practice of peer observation, how might schools address the logistical and cultural barriers that deter schools from developing and sustaining routines? In particular, it is important to understand how structures and routines for peer observation and other professional activities might build trust among teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and gradually shift the professional norms in a school. In this study, it was evident that when processes were defined and teachers received help in implementing peer observations, they were more likely to overcome cultural impediments to the process. Future research could explore how teachers respond to particular aspects of peer observation processes, for example whether to include or exclude feedback. In schools where teachers report that they receive support in developing their observation skills, what practices are reported to be most helpful? What conditions actually help teachers to

embrace the learning opportunity and overcome the cultural disequilibrium caused by having colleagues watch them and critique their instructional practices?

When researchers explore how schools approach peer observation, it will be important to examine the extent to which the practice is integrated with other professional activities and the effect of that integration. In this study, teachers in some of the schools described tight connections between their experiences with peer observation and professional development sessions or supervisory feedback, suggesting that peer observation may not succeed as a one-off intervention. In addition, this exploratory study indicates that teachers value the opportunity to observe their peers, but it is not yet clear what teachers take from the experience. What do teachers learn? Does their learning differ by levels of experience? Does peer observation lead to improvements in practice and improvements in student learning? If so, how?

There is growing agreement that schools and school systems need to invest in teachers' learning over the course of the "career continuum" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Researchers find that teachers continue to improve for at least ten years into their careers but at different rates, in part depending on the quality of their work environment (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Ladd & Sorensen, 2014). Although there is much less agreement about how to support teachers' development, collaboration among teachers likely is an important component of job-embedded professional learning. Traditional norms of privacy might lead one to think that peer observation would not be well received by teachers; this study suggests otherwise. With structured processes, systematic support and sufficient time, peer observation has the potential to allow teachers to benefit from each other's experience and knowledge, potentially reducing variability across classrooms, improving teaching quality, and thus serving all students better.

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Appendix A

Table 2. *Number of Interviewees at Each School*

School Name	Administrators*	Non-Teaching Staff **	Teachers in Training	Teachers	% of Total Teachers in the School Interviewed
Dickinson Elementary	1	2	n/a	15	56
Fitzgerald Elementary	2	2	n/a	14	47
Hurston K-8	4	5	n/a	21	31
Kincaid Charter Middle	5	4	2	16	38
Naylor Charter K-8	2	3	2	17	46
Rodriguez Charter K1-8	3	3	3	16	36

* Administrators include directors of CMOs and school based administrators who directly supervise teachers.

** Non-teaching Staff includes instructional coaches, parent coordinators, data leaders, recruitment officers, deans of discipline and other administrators who do not teach students and do not supervise teachers

Table 3. *Total Teachers Interviewed at Each School & Years of Experience*

School	Novice* (1- 3 years)	2nd Stage (4 - 10 years)	Veteran (11+ years)
Dickinson Elementary	3	5	7
Fitzgerald Elementary	1	11	2
Hurston K-8	6	11	4
Kincaid Charter Middle	4	11	1
Naylor Charter K-8	8	7	2
Rodriguez Charter K1-8	1	9	6
Totals	23	54	22

*Does not include Teachers in Training

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Teacher Interview Protocol

Intro: Study Explanation emphasizing that we really want to learn about your experience at this school.

1. Background:
 - a. How did you come to be in your current position at this school?
 - b. Starting with college, can you tell us what you've done?
 - i. Probe for: training and employment
2. Current Teaching Assignment:
 - a. What do you teach here?
 - b. How did you wind up in this position?
3. Overall view of school:
 - a. If another teacher would ask you, "What's it like to teach at _____?" How might you respond?
 - b. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a teacher here?
4. Hiring:
 - a. How were you hired at this school? Step-by-step.
 - b. Do teachers play a role in hiring other teachers? If so, how?
 - c. Has the hiring process changed at this school? If so, how and why?
5. Induction:
 - a. Did you have some kind of induction as a new teacher at this school? What worked and what didn't?
 - b. How are new teachers inducted now? How have things changed since you got here?
6. Support:
 - a. What kinds of supports are available here for teachers to improve their instruction?
 - b. What works well for you? What doesn't? (Probe: PD, Coaching, Collaboration, Evaluation)
7. Evaluation:
 - a. How is your teaching evaluated? Describe the process.
 - b. Was it helpful? How?
8. Administration:
 - a. Who do you go to for support? For what?
9. Social & Psychological Supports:
 - a. What sorts of social and psychological supports does your school offer for students?
 - b. What support do you get for interacting with parents and families?
10. Career goals:
 - a. How long do you expect to stay at this school? In what roles?
 - i. If yes: What keeps you at this school?
 - ii. If no: Why do you think you might leave?
11. Union:
 - a. What role does the union or the contract play in this school?
12. More: Do you have any additional comments?

Principal Interview Protocol

Overview of Study: 6 Schools, All high-poverty, high-minority. All Level 1.

1. Background:
 - a. How long have you been at this school? Prior experience in education? Anything else we should know about how you got here?
2. School Overview:
 - a. Could you first provide an overview of its structure and programs?
 - b. (Where applicable) What does it mean for your school to be a pilot/turnaround/charter school?
 - c. (Where applicable) How did you go about selecting teachers when ---- was placed in turnaround?
 - d. How would you describe it to a teacher or parent who might be interested in it—both its strengths and weaknesses?
3. Teachers: We'd like to get a sense of who your teachers are.
 - a. Where do they come from?
 - b. What formal or informal preparation do they have?
 - c. What attracts them to the school?
 - d. Approximately, what proportion has fewer than 10 years of experience? 5 years of experience? 0-5 years of experience? (Has that changed or remained steady?)
4. Recruitment and Hiring:
 - a. Could you describe the process you use to recruit and hire teachers? (Applicants per position? Teaching demonstration? Who decides?)
 - b. What challenges do you face in recruiting teachers?
 - c. Are there specific demographics or subject areas that you have trouble finding/attracting? If so, how have you addressed those challenges?
5. Assignment:
 - a. How do you assign teachers to a particular grade or subject?
 - b. Could you describe the teachers' responsibilities, both during school hours and outside of school hours? Scheduled and unscheduled time?
6. Compensation:
 - a. Please tell us about the pay scale for teachers. Are there additional stipends? If so, can you describe these opportunities?
7. Collaboration:
 - a. Are the teachers organized by teams, grade-levels, subjects? If so, what does that mean for how they do their work? What is the work of those teams?
8. Supports:
 - a. What supports can a new teacher count on in getting started? And for more experienced teachers?
9. Role:
 - a. Are there specialized roles for some teachers? (Teach Plus, team leaders, etc.) If so, please describe these roles.
10. Curriculum:
 - a. Does the school provide a curriculum for the teachers? If so, please tell us about it.
11. Professional Learning:

- a. Do you have formal professional development? Instructional coaches? If so, please tell us about them.
12. Supervision and Evaluation:
 - a. How do you supervise teachers? How do you evaluate teachers? Are these separate processes? Do students' test scores play a role in evaluating teachers?
13. Dismissal:
 - a. How frequently do you dismiss or decide not to rehire a teacher? Reasons?
14. Retention:
 - a. How long do teachers stay? Why do they stay? Why do they leave? Is there a type of teacher who stays or leaves? Is turnover a challenge?
15. Policy Context:
 - a. Does state or local policy play a role in how you approach building your teaching capacity?
16. Union:
 - a. What role if any does a teachers' union play at your school?
17. Have we missed anything?

Appendix C: List of Codes and Descriptors

Codes	Description
Assignment	Teacher Assignment: What do you teach/ your job at the school, views of your assignment
Background	Background: Past work history, education
WhyTeach	Why teach? Personal sense of purpose can include changes in views over time.
SchoolOverview	Facts about the school (the facts but not mission or culture), might include specific school goals
HistorySchool	History of School
FacultyComposition	Descriptions of the composition of the faculty
Equity	Interactions, policies or dynamics described in relation to race, ethnicity, social class
Hiring	Related to teacher recruitment, hiring, including teacher's experience of being recruited / hired. –timing, demo lessons, debriefs, meetings with current teachers, written applications, Who the school seeks and how they find candidates
WhySchool	Why chose school - why teach at this particular school? May reflect changes over time
Mission	Descriptions of what the school aspires to accomplish (if explicitly talking about mission do not double code with culture)
AdminAdmin	Interactions / relationships among administrators (including non-teaching positions such as coaches and guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles)
AdminLeadership	Descriptions of administrators' style, vision, agenda, priorities, purposes, etc. (includes self-descriptions)
AdminRole	Specific responsibilities and job descriptions of non-teaching faculty
AdminStudent	Relationship between administrators and students (include coaches, guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles)
AdminTeach	Interactions between administrators and teachers (include coaches, guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles in this code)
Demands	Teachers professional responsibilities and expectations, work hours, teachers views on demands
Resources	Material and human resources (money, buildings, positions, --if it is about admin roles will be double coded in Adminroles) - Facilities
Accountability	Related to external accountability (state accountability status and state testing, turnaround status) - what the state does and then what is done as a result
DistrictNetworkState	Formal relationships / governance from State, District or CMO, includes school boards and trustees
Testing	References to standardized tests, state tests, network tests and interim assessments and how used in the school
MonitoringStudents	Teachers' use of assessments and instructional strategies to monitor achievement
Student	Student Characteristics: Descriptions of students and their community
Neighborhood	Descriptions of the local surroundings of the school
Family	Ways of connecting families and community to school, Perceptions of parents/ families + Teacher and admin connections to parents / families
CurriculumPedagogy	What and how you teach - including instructional planning
SpEdELL	Descriptions of programs or approaches for educating students with special needs and /or ELLs
SpecialSubj	Referring to non-core academic classes (art, music, library, dance, etc) and extra-curricular or co-curricular programs or activities

Peer Observation

SchoolCulture	Expressions of school-wide norms & values including kids, teachers and parents (not explicit statements of mission), big picture that everyone from school would understand
Colleagues	Commentary on colleagues and their characteristics (what I think about the people I work with) - big picture impressions of colleagues
ProfCulture	Professional Culture- the norms of being a teacher or admin in this school. Big picture expectations for how we work together as professionals
Eval	Related to teacher supervision and evaluation: observations, feedback, meetings between supervisors and teachers, how work with teachers on instruction
Coaching	Formal instructional coaches, but NOT induction mentoring
Induction	Programs and supports (formal and informal) for new teachers: prior to day 1 and after day 1
FormalCollab	Deliberate, structured groups working together-organized by the school- including whole school sessions – including approach to lesson planning and who is included and who is not - JUST TEACHERS
InformalCollab	Specific work with colleagues that is not organized by the school, informal collegial interactions -JUST TEACHERS
RolesTeach	Formal roles and opportunities for career advancement (Teach Plus etc.) may have double coding when example of influence through a formal role including leadership teams, Teachers in Training, etc.
InfluenceTeach	Teacher opportunities as brokers of influence (teachers generally in their work having influence), including committees where you can voice concerns - Admin change view because of a teacher
CareerGrowth	Individual professional growth for career progression
OrderDiscipline	Safety, systems, expectations and rules for students, and enforcement
StudentSupports	Social and emotional and academic supports for students and behavioral - outside of classroom structure
StudentTeach	Interactions among teachers and students inside and outside the classroom.
Turnover	Why other people stay or leave; both causes and frequencies, personal plans to stay or leave, also about satisfaction and dissatisfaction, might be stuck in job
Pay	Payscale, stipends and other things related to compensation
Partners	Partners including City Year, Teach Plus, Ed Schools, etc.
Union	Related to the union and the contract
Gem Quote	This is a great quote.

Descriptor Categories for Characterizing Interviewees

Descriptor	Definition	Response options
School	School Name	
Grade Level	Grade Level Presently Taught	Non-teacher, pre-k, k,1, 2, 2 or more grades, all grades, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Gender	Gender	Male, female
Position	Position in the school or system	Recruitment officer, CMO administrator, principal, non-teaching faculty or administrator, teacher, assistant teacher / resident teacher, split role: teacher and other non teaching job
# years at this school	# of years working at this school counting this year	
# years at charter	# of years working at charter schools in total	
# years at district schools	# of years working at district schools in total	
# years at private schools	# of years working at private schools in total	
# years teaching	total of charter, district, private years	
Race / Ethnicity	Self-identified race / ethnicity	Black, White, Caribbean, Cape Verdean, Latino/a, multi-racial, other, Asian
Classroom type	Type of classroom in which interviewee teaches	Self-contained elementary multi subjects, departmentalized core subject, specific subject non-core, ELL/ Special Ed only
Age	Age of interviewee	