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Rethinking teachers' professional learning through unseen observation

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper discusses 'unseen observation' as an alternative model of classroom observation to support teachers' professional learning. The paper starts with a critical synopsis of how observation has been appropriated principally as a performance management tool for monitoring teacher effectiveness in the UK. It argues that the overreliance on assessment-based models has led to the hegemony of observation as a performative tool and its subsequent dilution as a catalyst for professional learning to develop teachers' pedagogic thinking and practice. As a counter narrative, this paper proposes an alternative, peer-based model, unseen observation, which reconceptualises and reconfigures observation for professional learning by prioritising collegial meaning-making and reflexive dialogue. Drawing on the concept of intersubjectivity to theorise unseen observation, the principles, purpose and practical application of this model are discussed, along with its benefits and challenges. The paper argues that unseen observation offers a structured approach for stimulating and channelling opportunities for teachers to engage in honest introspection, participatory sensemaking and reflexive dialogue of their practice. Meaningful and sustainable improvements in professional learning are arguably more likely to flourish by creating such opportunities, though further research is needed to investigate the application and impact of unseen observation as a model.

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Introduction

Classroom observation has traditionally been the dominant method used for monitoring, assessing and supporting the quality of teaching and the development of teachers' pedagogic practice in compulsory and further education. As O'Leary (2020, xii) discusses, classroom observation has had a longstanding role in the preparation, assessment and professional learning of teachers in the UK for many years:

> Whether it is in the context of an initial teacher education (ITE) course for new/student teachers or lecturers, a collaborative professional learning project for experienced educators, appraisal or an external inspection, classroom observation is a ubiquitous mechanism that permeates the working lives of all educators from the beginning to the end of their careers.

The migration to online delivery as a result of lockdown restrictions imposed during the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic meant that educational institutions were no longer able to rely on in-person classroom observation to undertake their quality assurance (QA) and quality

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improvement (QI) work. Instead, they had to think of alternatives to adapt to this new working environment. In the context of the UK, this presented both challenges and opportunities for colleges' and schools' internal quality work, as it also did for initial teacher education (ITE) providers' support and assessment of their student teachers' practice while on teaching placements. During the pandemic, responses varied widely across different institutions and providers. Some decided to put such work on hold, arguing that the transition to online teaching and learning had already resulted in significant workload challenges for their teaching staff. Others sought to transfer established systems of observation to the virtual environment, with 'virtual drop-ins', 'virtual learning walks' and 'virtual reviews' replacing traditional in-person observations. Yet, at the same time, there were those institutions that chose to use the hiatus created by the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink and explore alternative approaches to using observation to undertake this QA and QI work. It is against the backdrop of the pandemic and these developments that one such alternative approach to traditional observations and the focus of this paper has emerged, unseen observation.

The first part of this paper begins by briefly situating the place and purpose of observation in teaching in the UK. It argues that although observation is typically perceived as a multi-purpose mechanism, it has been appropriated quite narrowly as an assessment tool of performance management for monitoring and measuring the effectiveness of teachers and their teaching over the last thirty years (O'Leary and Brooks 2014). The paper contends that this continuing reliance of educational institutions on assessment-based models of observation has limited its value as a tool for developing teachers' professional learning and their wider understanding of their pedagogic thinking and decision making. With these limitations in mind, the second part of the paper moves on to discussing an alternative model, unseen observation, which reconceptualises and reconfigures observation by putting teacher learning and collegial development at the heart of the process. Drawing on the concept of intersubjectivity to theorise unseen observation, the principles, purpose and practical application of this model are discussed, along with its benefits and challenges. The paper argues that unseen observation offers a structured approach for stimulating and channelling opportunities for teachers to engage in honest introspection, participatory sensemaking and reflexive dialogue of their practice with colleagues.

Situating the place and purpose of observation in the UK education system

Classroom observation has a well-established role in the education, training and ongoing professional learning of teachers in the UK. Historically, observation has predominantly served as a dual-purpose mechanism for assessing and developing teachers and their classroom practice. However, this duality has arguably become dichotomised in recent years as a result of an education policy focus that has prioritised a particular purpose for observation as part of a quality assurance (QA) agenda (O'Leary 2020).

Observation has been relied on primarily as a method of assessing the effectiveness of teachers' classroom practice at all stages of their careers. For most teachers, their first experience of observation often occurs when undertaking teaching practice on an initial teacher education (ITE) course, where they are required to demonstrate a minimum level of competence over a series of assessed observations if they are to successfully acquire qualified teacher status. Upon entry to the profession, teachers' subsequent exposure to observation is dominated by the contexts of performance management, annual quality audits and external inspections, thus continuing the association between observation and performative judgement. Over the last three decades, observation has become an important source of evidence for QA governmental agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England as well as employers, as they have come to depend on it as a key data collection tool for capturing the quality of educational provision. Such evidence has typically formed the basis of judgements about the performance and competence of teachers, along with informing national and international debates on the characteristics of effective teaching

and learning. It is hardly surprising then that teachers should come to associate observation with an evaluative judgement of their professional capabilities and competence throughout their careers, particularly as their predominant experience of it is as a method of assessment.

The fact that classroom observation has become so closely associated with performance management in colleges and schools in England in recent years is no accident or historical anomaly but a consequence of the wider political and economic neoliberal reform agenda that has sought to transform the working cultures of public sector institutions (e.g. Ball 2012), regulating what they do and making them more accountable to the State. The hegemony of summative observations is thus arguably a predictable consequence of this and of the increasing control and influence of the State and aligned agencies like Ofsted. Since its creation as the self-appointed custodian of educational quality in England in the early 1990s, Ofsted's role has moved beyond that of inspecting standards to one of defining them, with the result that certain models of self-assessment and performance management have become normalised, the widespread use and reliance on summative observations being a case in point (O'Leary 2020).

Despite this traditional reliance on observation as a performance indicator of purported quality, it is important to acknowledge that it has also fulfilled a second main purpose across the education profession as a formative tool. In this context, observation has been used typically for modelling pedagogic skills, along with sharing and developing teachers' professional learning more widely. This application of observation as a formative tool commonly occurs in the contexts of ITE programmes and institutional provision to support the ongoing professional learning of qualified teachers in their workplaces, predominantly through collaborative, peer-based approaches such as lesson study (e.g. Cajkler *et al.* 2015, Wood 2017). In such contexts, not only does the application of observation as a method tend to differ from performance-based approaches but so too do the underpinning purposes. Invariably, formative models of observation are less hierarchically delineated, with peer-to-peer collaboration often superseding the power differential associated with performative models. Formative models tend to focus on nurturing pedagogic knowledge and skills and/or curriculum development, rather than making evaluative judgements on the professional competence of those being observed (e.g. Tilstone 2012, Martin 2017).

In describing a model of peer observation that she refers to as 'partnership observation', Tilstone (2012, p. 60) identifies what she considers the key elements underpinning any successful partnership as 'trust, commitment, common understanding and the identification of individual needs'. Other studies in the field of peer observation have also identified the importance of trust between participants as being central to the success of peer relationships and the observation process (e.g. Shortland 2004, Martin 2017). Similarly, the identification of individual needs is an aspect discussed by Carroll and O'Loughlin (2014) in their research exploring the particular challenges facing new entrants to teaching in higher education. As part of such collaborative approaches, professional learning is conceptualised as a reciprocal, iterative process from which all participants stand to benefit (e.g. Wingrove *et al.* 2018). Such relationships are more collegial in nature and therefore demand a more equitable sharing of power than the hierarchical orthodoxy that characterises assessment-based models of classroom observation used for performance management purposes. This is a noticeable feature of unseen observation, which is discussed in detail in the following section of this paper. In short, the nature of relationships is thus a particular factor highlighted in much of the relevant observation literature as integral to the success and sustainability of any approach and is paramount to encouraging authentic engagement and commitment to developing thinking and practice.

Fielding *et al.* (2005) argue that if teachers are to maximise their engagement with tools for professional learning such as observation, then they must be prepared to reflect openly and honestly on their own and others' practice, along with wanting to experiment with new ways of thinking and doing. A willingness to experiment and take risks is an important aspect of teachers' continued professional learning, as others have argued (e.g. Timperley 2011, Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, Darling-Hammond 2017). Yet such opportunities to do so largely depend on the learning cultures

(James and Biesta 2007) prevalent in teachers' workplaces and the extent to which they are afforded safe and collegial spaces to try out new ideas and practices without fear of reprisal or punitive judgement, along with the necessary time to engage in such work.

In summary, the application and purpose of classroom observation as a mechanism in the UK education system has been principally concerned with attempting to measure teacher performance for accountability and benchmarking purposes. This has led to the hegemony of observation as a performative tool of managerialist systems. While acknowledging the formative focus of peer-based approaches to classroom observation and the growth in the use of models such as lesson study in recent years (e.g. Wood 2017), these remain on the fringes compared to assessment-based models. Another consequence of the normalisation of this performative focus of observation is how it has constrained its value as a tool for developing teachers' learning and their wider understanding of their pedagogic thinking and decision making. It is precisely the development of these skills to which unseen observation has the potential to make a valuable contribution in reimagining the way in which observation can be used to support teachers' professional learning, as I argue in the second half of this paper. It is to a discussion of the model of unseen observation and its application that the focus of this paper now turns its attention.

Contextualising unseen observation as a concept and a model of observation

Unseen observation is not a new concept but is a model that dates back to the 1980s, originating in language teacher education (Rinvolucri 1988). Relatively unknown and having always been on the periphery of classroom observation approaches, it is only in recent years that there has been renewed interest and possibilities in its use (e.g. Sherrington and Caviglioli 2020). Originally designed for face-to-face interactions, unseen observation experienced a resurgence of interest during the pandemic, which resulted in its use being extended to remote, virtual environments such as those commonly used for online teaching (O'Leary 2021). This is indicative of its flexibility as a model and how it can be applied to differing forms of interaction, as well as a range of different teaching and learning contexts.

While there are some similarities between the stages of the unseen observation cycle (see Figure 1) and conventional models of peer observation, as discussed below, there are equally unique aspects that distinguish it significantly from other models. The most noticeable difference between unseen observation and other models is that it does not involve the observation of a taught lesson by a third party. In that sense, the term *observation* may seem like a contradiction. The removal of the physical or virtual presence of a third-party observer confronts the longstanding issue of the Hawthorne effect associated with observation, arguably allowing teachers to behave more naturally and authentically. This is particularly pertinent when considering how performance-management driven models of observation can lead to increased levels of inauthenticity in teachers' practice, especially when observation is used as a form of high-stakes assessment (Gitomer *et al.* 2014). Instead of an observer visiting the class to carry out a 'live observation', unseen observation can be defined as a model of observation that relies on the teacher engaging in a process of self-observation and self-analysis, as well as collaborative reflection and dialogue with their 'collaborator', before and after the taught lesson.

The concept of unseen observation is partly inspired by the fields of therapy and counselling insomuch as it is standard practice for the therapist or counsellor to listen to a person's account of real-life events/experiences *after* they have occurred, in contrast to witnessing them in real time (e.g. White and Epston 1990). The 'collaborator' is thus dependent on the unobserved teacher's own self-observation and reflections on their teaching as a key stimulus for the post-observation dialogue. Note the use of the term 'collaborator' rather than observer here, a term that is also used in narrative therapy where the therapist is considered as a collaborator. This is an important and deliberate distinction as it reconceptualises and reconfigures the relationship and the roles of the protagonists at the centre of the observation process. In unseen observation, the collaborator takes on the

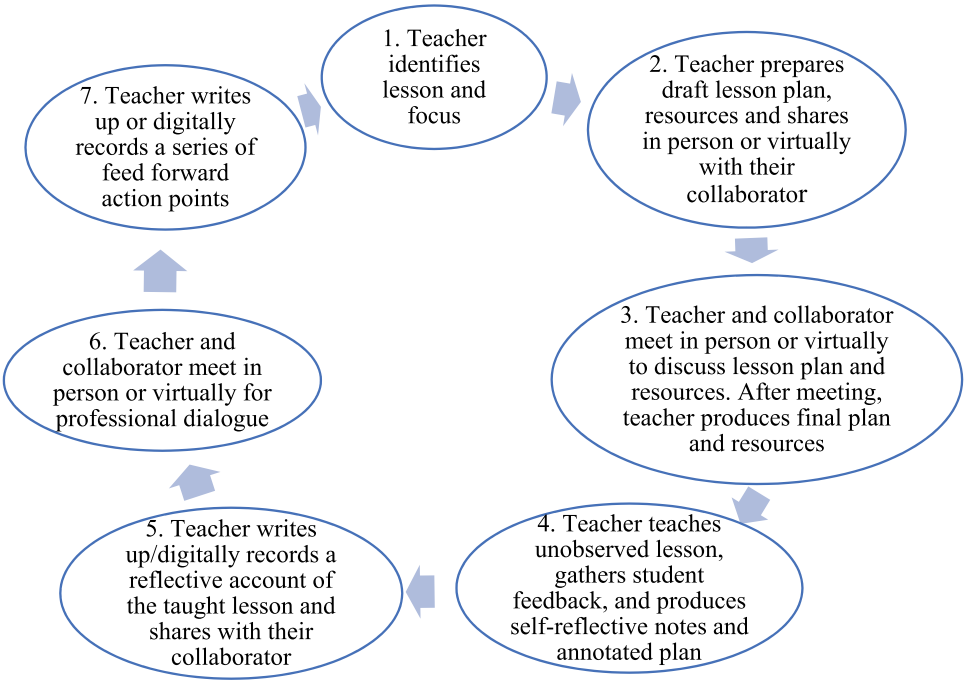

Figure 1. An overview of the 7 stages of the unseen observation cycle.

twofold role of what Whitmore (2002) refers to as a 'detached awareness raiser' and a 'coach', which means that rather than making evaluative judgements on the teacher's practice, the collaborator's role is to encourage the teacher to critically reflect on their practice, to delve more deeply into their thinking and decision making by asking probing questions that encourage them to engage reflexively in their professional learning. The collaborator would be an experienced practitioner who has experience in supporting teachers' professional learning and an understanding of coaching skills. Similarly, the term 'professional dialogue' is used rather than feedback as unseen observation is not an assessment-based model of observation and thus does not use assessment criteria as a shared frame of reference between teacher and collaborator.

Unseen observation places the control and accountability of the observation process in the hands of teachers, as it is built on the premise that they are the best people to decide their own professional needs and those of their students (e.g. Darling-Hammond 2017). It acknowledges the importance of the locus of understanding as something that is internal to the understander, which is a key principle of intersubjectivity discussed in the following section of this paper. This does not detract from the development of a shared or collective understanding in any way. On the contrary, it recognises the importance of allowing space and time for the teacher to unravel their thinking and decision making about their professional practice as a necessary stage in the process of shared meaning making and understanding.

Unseen observation follows a seven-stage cycle (see Figure 1) that starts with the teacher identifying a lesson and particular area of practice that they wish to focus on for the duration of the cycle (Stage 1). Unlike many observation models where the areas of focus are driven by internal or external policy agendas, the teacher is free to choose their own area of focus. The rationale is rooted in the belief that giving teachers the agency to choose their personalised focus not only emphasises their personal responsibility for taking charge of their continuous professional learning, but also invokes an ownership that is likely to be more authentic and sustainable. The only proviso they are given is that they must choose something that emanates from their daily classroom practice

that they wish to explore and/or develop in depth with a view to it contributing to the overall improvement of the student learning experience. This typically tends to be an aspect of pedagogy or curriculum that has emerged from individual self-reflection and/or prior reviews of their professional practice by others. It also aligns to Timperley's (2011, p. 7) view that for teachers' professional learning to have meaningful impact, it 'must reference their learning to both themselves and their students'.

In Stage 2, the teacher prepares their lesson plan and resources, sharing them with their collaborator in advance of an in person/virtual meeting (Stage 3). The pair discuss the rationale for the selected teaching approach(es), tasks and resources planned for the lesson, along with the anticipated impact on the students' learning. The Stage 3 conversation is also an opportunity for the two to develop a shared understanding of some of the contextual factors relating to the chosen lesson and students, as well as exploring more holistic issues about teaching and learning that reveal some of the underlying rationale that informs teachers' thinking and decision-making when preparing a lesson. Examples of typical topics that the two may explore include how the lesson relates to what students have learnt previously, how the teacher adapts their practice to meet their students' needs, how the teacher intends to monitor students' understanding during the lesson, what the anticipated challenges of the lesson might be etc.

Stages 2 and 3 of the cycle highlight the importance given to the planning and preparation elements of teaching, with the depth of reflection, discussion and articulation of decision-making distinguishing unseen observation from many conventional models of observation, where much of the discussion centres on the post-observation stage. For many teachers, the opportunity to engage in thorough discussions about the thinking and preparation that goes into their planning of a lesson as part of the observation process is rare and largely limited to ITE courses they undertake at the beginning of their careers (Fernandez 2010). Yet the work involved in planning for teaching is an important part of the process and can reveal valuable insights into teachers' professional practice (e.g. Peter 2006). Unseen observation acknowledges this by incorporating a dedicated pre-lesson discussion as a fundamental element of the cycle. It provides a platform for individuals and institutions alike to prioritise and formally recognise the value of in-depth thinking and discussion about teaching and learning both in terms of planning and delivering a lesson. If the collaborator is to develop shared understanding and to make a meaningful contribution to the teacher's learning, then exploring the planning and preparation that has gone into the lesson and what that reveals about the teacher's professional practice and areas for development are essential parts of the process that need to be established as a starting point in the collaborative discussion. Leaving the substantive discussion until the post-observation stage, as is the case with most traditional models of observation, reduces the opportunities to build such shared understanding and ultimately makes it more difficult for those involved, as Soslau (2015) found in her research on the use of observation involving ITE tutors and their student teachers.

In Stage 4, the teacher delivers the unobserved lesson and is asked to produce a record of self-reflective notes, along with an annotated lesson plan. They are also encouraged to embed opportunities into the lesson for students to evaluate their learning experience when appropriate. Identifying the most opportune moments in the lesson to incorporate these student evaluations is something that can be discussed during the Stage 3 meeting. These sources of evidence are then used to inform the teacher's subsequent reflections (Stage 5) and professional dialogue with their collaborator (Stage 6). In Stage 5, the teacher writes up and/or digitally records a reflective account of the lesson, which they share with their collaborator prior to meeting. The teacher and collaborator then meet in person/virtually in Stage 6 for a post-lesson dialogue to discuss the lesson, during which they interrogate the assumptions upon which the plan was based and examine the sources of evidence, along with the teacher's perceptions of the lesson's effectiveness in achieving the anticipated outcomes.

In contrast to assessment-based models of observation where interaction is largely determined by the observer, unseen observation places the locus of control in the hands of the teacher. It is their

recounting of the lesson, both in terms of their predictive planning through the lesson plan and decision making beforehand, along with their reflective account of the actual taught lesson after the event, that acts as the driving force for professional dialogue between the teacher and their collaborator. Thus the roles of both parties are transformed, with a greater emphasis on dialogic interaction that is more conducive to participatory sensemaking than the functional transmission of declarative judgements and statements that typifies evaluative approaches. Stage 7 concludes the unseen observation cycle with the teacher writing up or digitally recording a series of feed forward action points that form the basis of their continuing development on their chosen area of focus. This final feed forward stage requires the teacher to draw together the insights they have gained on their practice during the unseen observation cycle, with a view to identifying feed forward action points that they plan to focus on further to improve their practice. For example, have they identified new skills or knowledge they would like to develop? Have they decided to change the way they are doing something? Have they identified any support needs and available resources to meet their changing needs?

Despite the fact that unseen observation has existed as a model of observation for several decades, it has always lacked a supporting theorisation to explain its underlying principles, values and how it differs to conventional models of observation that are driven by the purposes of assessment. The next section of this paper draws on the concept of intersubjectivity to theorise unseen observation in the context of its value as a tool of professional learning.

Intersubjectivity, unseen observation and professional learning

Esterhazy *et al.* (2021) argue for the need to move beyond what they perceive as the narrow parameters of peer observation of teaching. In their research into teaching in higher education, they propose the alternative term 'collegial faculty development' (CFD) to encompass a more comprehensive and holistic conceptualisation of the range of practices that support teachers to improve the quality of their practice. One of the theoretical tools that they suggest has the potential to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of CFD is intersubjectivity:

> The sociocultural perspective offers the notion of intersubjectivity as a relevant analytical entrance in studying how faculty members learn from – and with – each other through CFD interactions. Intersubjectivity is central in sociocultural thinking (Cooper-White 2014) and denotes a fundamental reciprocity in interaction. The most basic dyadic relation is two or more actors allowing access to one another's experiences, thereby opening a shared reality. This basic co-constructive notion of reality is deeply dialogic in nature, potentially providing valuable access to the more deeply rooted common feature in all CFD activities (Esterhazy *et al.* 2021, p. 261).

The concept of intersubjectivity was originally developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the context of the psychology of communication and his wider work on phenomenology. Husserl used the term to refer to the interchange of thoughts and feelings between two people, as facilitated by empathy (Cooper-White 2014). Intersubjectivity can be considered the sharing of one person's experience or perception of reality with another, or, to paraphrase Deetz (1979), the transformation of a personal experience (subjectivity) into an interpersonal experience (intersubjectivity). Fundamental tenets of the interaction between the self and another is the mutual recognition of each other as unique but, at the same time, equal. Intersubjectivity is thus a state of being in which each person recognises and respects that they are social beings who exist as a being with others. Through a series of questions he poses, Deetz (1979, p. 7) captures some of the complex challenges of communication between the self and another that intersubjectivity seeks to tackle in the quest for developing a co-constructed, shared understanding:

> How do I as a communicant get into the other's mind or grasp the other's self so that I can know his/her experience? How do I know that my experience is understood? How can bridges be built between persons so that they understand more completely?

Intersubjectivity has often been used in the social sciences to express shared understanding and meaning making between two or more people. In discussing Dewey's work on language and communication, Biesta (1995) refutes the idea of it simply involving the transactional transference of information from one person to another. As Merleau-Ponty (2010) notes, 'Language is an act of transcending. Thus, we cannot consider it to simply be a container of thought; we must see in it an instrument of conquest of self through contact with others' (p. 41) as 'language is a manifestation of human intersubjectivity' (p. 63). Biesta (1995) also stresses the importance of understanding intersubjectivity as a collaborative and dialogic process in which meaning is created *through* interaction. As De Jaegher *et al.* 2017, p. 492) state, 'intersubjectivity is characterised as participatory sensemaking: the embodied, interactive coordination of sensemaking.' This has important implications for teachers' professional learning in the context of observation approaches, especially in terms of how such work is conceptualised and operationalised to create the optimum conditions for meaningful learning to occur.

Firstly, it implies that for effective communication to occur between those involved in the observation process, it is fundamental that a shared understanding is established of whatever the chosen focus is of the professional learning activity between those involved, along with their respective frames of reference. Deetz (1979) argues that intersubjectivity is an a priori condition *for* effective collaborative communication rather than a condition derived *from* communication and must therefore be established as a starting point if meaningful change is to occur. Developing meaningful relationships and effective communication for intersubjective understanding does not occur overnight but over a sustained period of time during which reciprocal trust between those involved is afforded the space and time to develop. Episodic models of observation where observers visit lessons sporadically arguably militate against the development of such meaningful relationships, thus emphasising the importance of embedding intersubjectivity throughout the observation process as a way of being and doing. In her research into the interaction between student teachers and their teacher educators during the post-observation dialogue, Soslau (2015, p. 2) identified this shared understanding as an essential factor for these teacher educators to enable their student teachers to 'learn from their teaching experiences, develop the necessary skills to negotiate and contribute to professional discourse (Smith 2005), and prepare for engagement in future communities of practice'. Although Soslau's research focused on student teachers, there are parallels to the relevance of the central role that intersubjectivity can play in shaping and coordinating the effectiveness of professional dialogue more widely in the context of observation. It not only emphasises the centrality of collaborative dialogue in sensemaking and shared understanding, but the need to carefully consider the balance between pre- and post-observation interaction, along with transactional and interactional dialogue, a point which will be explored in more detail below. Furthermore, there are corresponding implications for the dynamics of dialogic interactions, particularly regarding issues of power and control in the context of the relationship between the 'observer' and 'observed'.

Secondly, acknowledging intersubjectivity as an important element of effective professional dialogue raises questions about the extent to which opportunities for collaborative, participatory meaning-making are curtailed in hierarchical, assessment-based models of observation where the observer occupies the principal role of assessor. There is a clear delineation of power and control between the observer and observed in such models which inevitably shapes the nature of the interaction between the two. Typically, the observer leads and often dominates the discussion and knowledge exchange, with the focus and scope of the dialogue largely dependent on what they choose to discuss (e.g. Tilstone 2012). In contrast, the principles and parameters of unseen observation, as discussed earlier, are purposefully designed to maximise the locus of control and ownership of the process for the (un)observed teacher, as it is their teaching that is prioritised as the focus of this professional learning activity. In acknowledging the importance of the locus of understanding as something that is internal to the understander, intersubjectivity in the context of professional learning thus provides a rationale for the need to challenge and reimagine

normalised delineations of power and control such as those epitomised by hierarchical models of observation. Furthermore, conventional assessment-based models of observation are typically driven by the 'instrument' rather than the individual. In other words, the accompanying assessment criteria and evaluative outcome underpinning such models play a central role in shaping the focus of the observation as well as the interaction between the observer and the observed teacher. As others have argued, one of the shortcomings of such models is that they tend to adopt a reductionist approach to teaching and learning (e.g. Edgington 2016). An unintended consequence of such reductionist approaches is that they end up failing to address the issue of the teacher as an individual with their own beliefs, values and knowledge systems. Yet all these factors have an important contribution to make in developing a shared understanding of a teacher's professional identity and helping teachers reflect meaningfully on their practice, and as such need to be considered as part of the professional dialogue.

Thirdly, there is the implication that intersubjectivity is an inherently creative and spontaneous process, which makes it difficult to predict and plan for in advance, as these dialogic encounters are contingent on ever-evolving experiences and unique frames of reference. Thus, in the case of using observation as a vehicle for professional learning, it accentuates situated dialogue as the key driver for collaborative sensemaking but also acknowledges the flexible and dynamic nature of such dialogue. This calls into question the appropriateness of conventional assessment-based approaches to observation, for example, as such approaches are invariably underpinned by static criteria that are used as a central point of reference to frame the dialogue between the observer and observed. Arguably, such criteria impose a pre-determined filter or even distort the dialogue between interlocutors, especially given that the observer as assessor draws on these criteria as a key frame of reference when recording their assessment of the observed lesson. Besides, as assessment-based approaches to observation inevitably involve some kind of performance outcome, it could be argued that such conditions lead to the process becoming more 'high stakes' for the observed teacher, which in turn may have counterproductive consequences for the collaborative dialogue between the two. In other words, observations as high stakes assessments can provoke a guardedness and a reluctance on the part of the observed teacher to lay bare their pedagogic thinking and practice and to engage in honest introspection, dialogue and authentic teacher learning.

Another consideration that is pertinent to optimising the conditions for intersubjectivity to flourish is the creation of trust and respect between those involved. Esterhazy *et al.* (2021, p. 262) argue that 'trust and respect are closely related to the idea that participants can develop intersubjectivity only when they recognize the relevance of each other's knowledge in their own context'. With regards to the relationship between the observer and the observed, this draws attention to the importance of ensuring that sufficient time and space are built into the observation process to allow participants to move beyond transactional exchanges driven by a performance and accountability agenda, and to focus more on engaging in shared thinking and participatory meaning making. Building relationships of trust also requires a cultural shift in relinquishing control on the part of the observer to provide the teacher with a greater degree of professional autonomy. As discussed below, this is an underpinning principle of the model of unseen observation and its application in practice.

A final consideration regarding the value of intersubjectivity to our understanding of observation as a tool for teachers' professional learning relates to reflexivity. In his discussion of the American philosopher George Herbert Mead's work on intersubjectivity, Biesta (1998) draws attention to Mead's claim that social interaction both precedes and produces reflective consciousness: 'the ability to make oneself the object of one's own attention – an ability which is commonly referred to as reflexivity or self-consciousness – has its origin in the social situation.' In other words, reflexivity is not an inherent characteristic or individual attribute but an effect that emerges because of our social interaction with others, thus implying that social encounters are a precondition for its development. In terms of the relevance of intersubjectivity to the role of reflexivity in observation approaches and to professional learning more widely, there are important considerations for how it

can contribute to our understanding of the value of alternative approaches such as unseen observation, along with the implications for how we conceptualise and undertake reflexive practice. Given the central role that reflexivity plays in teachers' professional learning, this is certainly an aspect worthy of further exploration.

In their discussion of the overarching pedagogical principles that inform contemporary education, Thorburn *et al.* (2021, p. 13) argue for the need to improve and modify the way in which we record experiences with tools such as reflective journals. They suggest one way to do this would be to adopt 'a sharper concentration on questions and circumstances that naturally arise through happenings and encounters experienced in lessons.' Although Thorburn and Stolz focus on the experience of school students and their teachers, the principles are transferable to the professional learning of teachers. Just as 'students can come to reflect on their visible and bounded, sense-laden experiences that can yield shared understandings of basic truths from which each student can reflect on and analyse their particular experiences' (*ibid.*), so too can teachers reflect on and analyse their professional practice through the lens of unseen observation. Working together with their collaborator, whose role it is to provoke discussion and to encourage the teacher to critically reflect on their pedagogic decision making, teachers are afforded opportunities to interrogate their practice through a methodical, yet personalised approach.

Reflections on the benefits and challenges of unseen observation

Unseen observation shifts the traditional emphasis of assessment-based approaches to observation from a competence-verifying performance to a process of reflexive practice that prioritises deep, meaningful thinking about teaching and learning through collegial conversations and collective reflection. As the description of the cycle above reveals, this takes place through detailed conversations about the teacher's planning, their teaching and analysis of its impact and effectiveness. In removing the performance element traditionally associated with assessment-based models of observation, unseen observation enables practitioners to reconceptualise and reconfigure observation as an educational tool of inquiry to support their professional learning rather than simply to evaluate their performance. Recalibrating the locus of control between the 'observer' and the '(un) observed' is a fundamental factor in creating the conditions for a more equitable working relationship, reducing some of the counterproductive effects often associated with conventional models of observation (O'Leary 2020). Placing the teacher's thinking and decision making at the centre of the process empowers them to explore and discuss wider aspects of their beliefs about teaching and learning in greater depth, instead of focusing on an isolated observed session. Notwithstanding these perceived advantages of unseen observation, it is important to acknowledge that reconceptualising and reconfiguring observation in such a way is not without its challenges.

Undoubtedly, a commonly identified limitation of unseen observation is the fact that the collaborator hears only one side of the story, as they are reliant on the teacher's self-observation and recollection of the lesson. For some education leaders, the lack of a third-party observation may seem too radical a change to make insomuch as it relinquishes too much control to teachers and reduces the remit of those who would normally undertake observations as part of their QA role. This loss of control can be unsettling for those who are accustomed to using observation as a tool to evaluate and benchmark teacher performance. Of course, it is conceivable that what teachers say they do in an unseen lesson observation may not necessarily be an accurate reflection of what actually happens. The honesty and reliability of the teacher's introspection therefore becomes a linchpin of the potential success and effectiveness of unseen observation and the extent to which teachers are prepared to open themselves up and engage in such reflexivity. However, researchers such as Stolz (2020, p. 1091) have argued that a first-person led recollection of experiences can be 'bound by the same checks-and-balances, or judgements as anyone else when it comes to claims being made about notions of being and associated truth or truths'. This would suggest that honesty may not necessarily be the biggest challenge to the success and effectiveness of

models like unseen observation, but rather the extent to which teachers' professional dispositions prepare them for engaging in reflexive practice, a challenge explored further below.

In contrast, the absence of an observer whose primary role is driven by a performance management agenda can arguably have a liberatory effect on some teachers. The removal of the surveillance and performance elements of traditional observations creates a safe space that can encourage teachers to experiment, take risks and be more creative in their teaching without the fear of being judged. As Timperley (2011, xviii) argues, 'active inquiry, learning and experimenting have to become teachers' core business of thinking as a professional'. As individual teachers are empowered to decide the focus of their unseen observation, this provides them with increased autonomy to take ownership of their practice, along with the freedom to reflect more meaningfully and deeply on why they do what they do and its impact on their students. That unseen observation is underpinned by a personalised approach means that the professional needs specific to the individual teacher are prioritised and valorised. This lays the foundations for teachers to engage with observation in a more authentic way, which can lead them to experience it as a more meaningful and valuable process. This contrasts with the limited sense of agency that they experience with assessment-based approaches where the focus and terms of reference have been decided for them by others (e.g. University and College Union (UCU) 2013).

The ubiquity of observation in education not only means that it is a familiar method to all teachers, but it is also commonly used as a catalyst for reflective practice in formative models of observation. Reflection and classroom observation have close connections in the context of teachers' professional learning but for such learning to be effective and sustainable, certain conditions need to be established that distinguish formative models such as unseen observation from those associated with performance management. One of the fundamental factors relates to the change in power differential between participants, with a more collaborative, egalitarian approach characterising the former as opposed to the hierarchical delineations epitomised by the latter. Added to this is the conceptualisation of observation as a tool for reciprocal learning, which is based on the premise that both parties bring knowledge and experience to this discursive relationship, not just the observer, and thus both stand to benefit from participating in the process by engaging in collaborative reflection and discussion with each other.

The centrality of reflexivity to the workings of the unseen observation cycle has implications for both the institution and the individual. It cannot be assumed that staff will already have the necessary skills to undertake these roles effectively. From an institutional perspective, the introduction of a radical approach like unseen observation requires an ongoing investment in time and resources to support the delivery and development of these skills as part of an institutional training programme. Training on self-reflection skills, peer coaching and questioning skills are all examples of the kind of fundamental support that need to be considered and provided to staff before beginning to implement unseen observation across the institution. The reflective skills of the teacher and the coaching skills of their collaborator will undoubtedly play an important part in how successful they are in developing intersubjectivity, along with shaping the quality and depth of their professional dialogue.

Regardless of the differing models, purposes and contexts of observation, opportunities for teachers to review and reflect on their practice and engage in collaborative dialogue with others are commonly identified as the most valuable elements of the process (Martin and Double 1998). Unseen observation provides a framework for practitioners to engage in a structured process of collaborative reflection and sensemaking about their practice. Unlike assessment-based models of observation that individualise teachers' practice, it conceptualises professional learning not as an individual act or the sole responsibility of the teacher but as a process that is socially situated, as it involves colleagues coming together to collaboratively reflect on, analyse and discuss their teaching and their students' learning. Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) work on 'professional capital' emphasises the importance of collaboration between teachers. Their argument centres on the premise that teachers learn and improve more if they 'are able to work, plan, and make decisions with other

teachers rather than having to make everything up or bear every burden by [themselves]' (p. 102). This is the basis of what they refer to as 'social capital' in their conceptualisation of professional capital. As Putnam (2000, 19) explains, 'social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.' Visone's (2022) research on 'collegial visits' in a single case study in a US elementary school identified an increase in social capital among those teachers who participated, resulting in a growth in trust, collegial support and a collective commitment to collaborate to improve the student learning experience. Once again, this reinforces the relevance and value of intersubjectivity when considering the effectiveness of observation as a conduit for teachers' professional learning.

Trust is the bedrock of social capital and an essential ingredient of any successful collaboration. As Hargreaves and Fullan maintain, 'groups with purpose that are based on trust also learn more. They get better at their work' (2012, p. 90). Sztompka (1999) suggests that there is a causal link between risk-taking, social capital and trust. By detaching observation from the domain of assessment and empowering practitioners to take control of and responsibility for their own professional learning, unseen observation creates the conditions in which trustworthy interactions and learning relationships can flourish between colleagues. The ethos imbued in unseen observation is that teachers are qualified, trusted professionals whose learning is best supported by being afforded the time and space to engage in participatory sensemaking and reflexive dialogue with their colleagues on their practice, with a view to improving themselves and the learning experiences of their students.

Conclusion

Meaningful and sustainable improvements in teachers' professional learning that feed into improvements in the quality of the teaching and learning experience thrive in organisational cultures where teachers are afforded opportunities to build social capital, develop relationships of collegial trust and engage in reflexive dialogue with their peers. As Darling-Hammond (2014) argues, the development of collaborative communities of teacher learning 'will do more to support student achievement than dozens of the most elaborate ranking schemes ever could', thus emphasising the importance of teachers' professional learning as a collective act that is fostered through the development of collegial communities of practice rather than accountability systems that seek to monitor and measure individual teacher performance. Yet the status quo of how the UK education system conceptualises and configures classroom observation as a method in relation to QI and QA continues to rely on an assessment-based approach, which is driven by an individualising performance management agenda that is more concerned with sorting rather than supporting teachers.

Unseen observation imbues an approach to professional learning that challenges normalised policies and practices, particularly the orthodoxies that have shaped the contexts and cultures surrounding educators' engagement with observation and the underlying purposes driving its use in recent decades. In its ontological and methodological reconceptualisation of observation, unseen observation provides a credible alternative for moving beyond the confines of the normalised thinking and practice of performative approaches and allows us to reimagine observation as a genuine tool for supporting rather than sorting teachers.

Unseen observation views teachers as part of a valuable community of qualified, knowledgeable professionals who have earned the right for their work to be trusted. The experience of the pandemic over the last two years has provided us with an opportunity to rethink and reshape our approaches to teaching and learning. It would be an opportunity missed if we were simply to return to relying on normalised, assessment-based models of observation that have limited value to teachers' professional learning. Instead, through further research, with unseen observation we have an opportunity to think about and engage differently with observation as a tool for teacher learning.

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