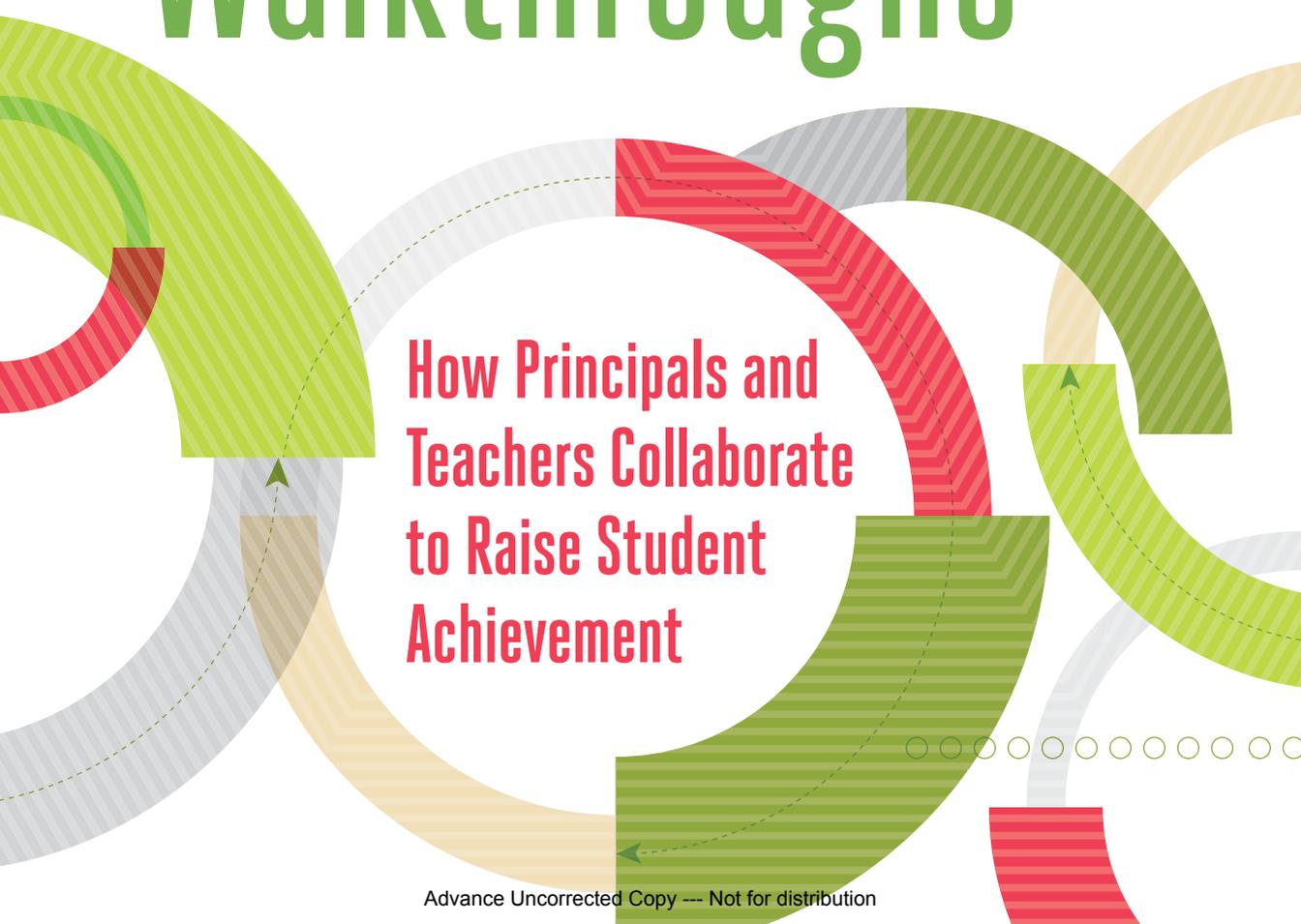




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Formative Classroom Walkthroughs

How Principals and
Teachers Collaborate
to Raise Student
Achievement



Promoting a Culture of Professional Learning

The complexities of teaching and learning in 21st century schools require educators who meet those challenges by continually evaluating evidence and exercising trustworthy judgment. On a daily basis, they must continue to learn about effective educational practices and to weigh the effectiveness of their own classroom practices. Without both perspectives, educators are hard pressed to deepen their understanding about their students and use that evidence to exercise sound professional judgment. To make good decisions, educators must keep what is best for their students at the heart of their decision making.

Toward this end, many principals, curriculum directors, coaches, and teachers are using a new view of classroom walkthroughs—formative rather than evaluative—that helps them to gather real-time evidence to guide their decisions, cultivate schoolwide improvement efforts, and sustain meaningful professional development. Supported by years of research on effective professional learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995), formative walkthroughs help educators engage each other in directly confronting research and theory to regularly evaluate their own practices in a safe culture characterized by mutual assistance and sustained through coaching and collaborative problem solving around specific problems of practice (Moss & Brookhart, 2014).

We wrote this book to help educators engage in the formative walk-through process to harness the power of collaborative inquiry and evidence-based decision making. In it we employ a *learning target theory of action* (Moss & Brookhart, 2012) grounded in the belief that improving student

learning and teacher quality happens in the immediacy of daily lessons or it doesn't happen at all. Through our extensive work with teachers and administrators in schools and districts, we have found that the same learning target theory of action that has helped thousands of educators increase student learning holds particular promise for coaching and supporting educational professionals at all levels of practice.

A Collaborative Learning Culture

Simply stated, the goal of a collaborative learning culture is to build communities of teachers who continuously engage in the study of their craft; develop the shared language and common understandings necessary to pursue collegial study of new knowledge and skills; and provide structure for follow-up and follow-through (Showers, 1985). Formative walkthroughs promote these actions when they are paired with collaborative feedback, used in the context of professional learning targets, and focused on both professional learning and student learning. Formative walkthroughs are about the learning of all parties within the school: administrators, teachers, and students. In a collaborative culture, feedback typically takes the form of professional conversations, and follow-through looks at evidence of both teaching improvements and student achievement. Good coaching that includes formative feedback can be instrumental in helping educators better understand the need for evidence-based change and improvement in their practice (Puig & Froelich, 2006).

A collaborative learning culture integrates newly acquired professional knowledge with the daily work of teachers, promotes collective participation, aligns with instructional goals and practices, links to national and local standards, and provides opportunities for active participation and learning (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). A culture of evidence-based learning and decision making raises the quality of teaching and learning in every classroom as a public process of collaborative inquiry. This process requires instructional planning that digs deeply into content and fosters conversations and questions about improving student learning that are continuous, evidence-based, and “nondefensive” (Saphier & West, 2010, p. 46). Following this logic, then, the best collaborative learning is “nonthreatening and supportive” and

helps educators continuously enact their new learning to see it work with students (Poglinco et al., 2003).

In a collaborative learning culture, professionals engage in “learning by doing.” That is, the collaborators must commit to six key behaviors: (1) focusing on the learning of each student; (2) building a culture aimed at common goals to which all educators are held mutually accountable; (3) participating in collective inquiry into effective practice against current reality; (4) using an action orientation that quickly turns intentions into observable realities; (5) having a persistent dissatisfaction with the status quo that drives mutual commitment to continuous improvement; and (6) holding a results orientation that assesses efforts against evidence rather than intention (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010).

How Does the Formative Walkthrough Process Promote a Collaborative Learning Culture?

The formative walkthrough process emphasizes learning inside of practice. It uses the same research-based formative learning processes that raise student achievement by focusing on three powerful sources of evidence: knowing where learning is headed, having a clear understanding of where it is now, and using up-to-the-minute evidence to decide what to do next to improve understanding (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Moss & Brookhart, 2009, 2012). The formative walkthrough process is grounded in a learning target theory of action to promote educational decisions based on what students are *actually doing* in their daily lessons to produce evidence of their learning.

The formative walkthrough process combines four formative elements: (1) a professional learning target, (2) professional performances of understanding that enable the collection of evidence of professional growth, (3) clear and understandable professional *look-fors* (success criteria), and (4) feed-forward information. Let’s examine each element and how it works with the others in the formative walkthrough process.

Professional learning target

A professional learning target is a clear description of the next level of learning and work that a teacher, a group of teachers, or an entire staff will

aim for during a relatively short period of time (think days or a week, not months or a year). It is part of a larger learning trajectory that aims at a more complex professional learning goal. For example, a learning goal for the year might be *to increase the appropriate use of rubrics to guide writing across the curriculum*. If we were on a trip, this long-term goal would be our final destination. Each professional learning target, then, is a mile marker that describes an appropriate chunk of the long-term learning goal that a teacher or a group of teachers will tackle on the way.

A professional learning target has five characteristics. First, it describes exactly what teachers will *learn* in their classrooms, not what teachers will *do*. This powerful distinction sharply differentiates a professional learning target from a traditional professional development goal. Second, this description of learning uses language the teacher can understand and is appropriate to the teacher's current level of professional development. Third, the description of learning is framed from the point of view of a teacher who is learning the concept for the first time, not the coach or administrator who is familiar with or has expertise in the concept. Fourth, the description of learning is connected to a specific performance of understanding—what teachers will do, say, make, or write to deepen their understanding, demonstrate effectiveness, and gather evidence from their students' actual work to support claims of improving student achievement. Finally, the professional learning target contains things that teachers can look for in their students' work to assess and regulate their own classroom practice.

Here is an example that illustrates the first three characteristics of a professional learning target for teachers who are working toward a long-term goal of incorporating rubrics into classrooms to guide student writing. The teachers have already mastered the difference between a rubric and a scoring scheme, understand the different types of rubrics, and can explain the most effective ways to design a rubric to describe each criterion over different levels of performance quality. During the coming week, the teachers will aim for the following professional learning target: *We are learning that clear, student-friendly criteria organized as an analytic rubric can be used before, during, and after a student performance to help students learn to assess and regulate the quality of their own writing*. Notice that the learning target describes the learning—not the doing—and uses professional language that reflects teachers' growing understanding.

Professional performance of understanding

A professional performance of understanding is a concrete, relevant, real-work-of-the-classroom task that teachers perform to deepen their understanding and assess their growing competence in relation to their learning target. What elevates it from a task that teachers “do” is that teachers have things to look for in their work that help them assess and regulate the quality of their practice. In other words, for something to count as a professional performance of understanding, it must both deepen and assess teacher learning. Building on our example about the teachers who are learning about the power of rubrics to develop students who can assess and regulate the quality of their own writing, the coach, the administrator, or the professional learning community designs the following performance of understanding: *During the coming week we will design a series of lessons that use a general analytic writing rubric to help our students plan their writing, create a first draft, produce an edited version of the draft annotated with the students’ reasons for their changes, and submit a revised piece of writing that includes their final self-assessment against the criteria from the rubric.* This is what the teachers are asked to do to learn more about the role rubrics can play in helping students improve the quality of their own writing. What will make it a true performance of understanding is the set of look-fors they will use as they teach, monitor, regulate, and assess themselves during the lessons. Educators who will observe and coach them will use the same set of look-fors to formulate their feedback and to scaffold their level of support.

Professional look-fors

Most professional development asks teachers to “try something out” after they have learned about it during a workshop or through in-class modeling. Few of these experiences are guided by publicly stated success criteria that teachers and administrators will use to monitor, regulate, and feed professional learning forward. In sharp contrast, the formative walkthrough process requires that each educator understand and commit to what will count as evidence of good or improved work.

To be useful, professional look-fors must

- describe the *quality of student learning* that will result from the teacher's improved performance;
- be observable, measurable, and distinct from one another (if there is more than one look-for);
- form a complete set; and
- exist along a range of quality.

Framing the look-fors to describe evidence from student learning is another powerful distinction of the formative walkthrough process. Too often we lose sight of what should be our bottom line—improving student learning. To that end, an effective set of professional look-fors describes what anyone who observes the lesson will be able to recognize in the *students'* work and performances. The look-fors are written in such a way that teachers who are new to the concept can use the criteria to continuously assess and regulate their practice and help get themselves to the professional learning target.

Let's continue our example about the teachers who are helping students use rubrics before, during, and after a writing task to increase student self-assessment. The teachers have created the following set of look-fors with their principal: *My students can use the language of the rubric throughout this week's writing process to (1) explain the criteria for good writing that must be present in their story; (2) provide reasons for their writing and editing decisions; and (3) ask specific questions when they ask for help.* Notice that crafting the look-fors to describe the effect the teachers will have on students keeps everyone focused on the bottom line—student learning—as the clear and unmistakable reason for the coaching enterprise.

Feed-forward information

The formative walkthrough process sets up educators for success. It does this by clearly defining what is expected in terms of professional look-fors that describe student learning and achievement. Feed-forward information, then, is framed by the same professional look-fors and can come from principals, coaches, members of professional learning communities, and teachers themselves as they work to improve their practice. The professional learning target, the performance of understanding, and the look-fors make the learning public, observable, and measurable so that there are no surprises and no excuses. Everyone is aiming for the same understanding and helping to feed

each other forward. As we will discover in Chapter 3, the formative walk-through process uses a three-part analysis to formulate and provide effective feedback. It honors the micro view and the snapshot view of effective feedback and helps teachers see the long view of professional learning.

Shifting the aim of professional development

Merging these four elements—the professional learning target, the performance of understanding, look-fors, and feed-forward information—within a culture of collaborative inquiry shifts the aim of professional development. Expectations increase from simply grasping or demonstrating “best practice” to continuously documenting professional growth through up-to-the-minute evidence from improved student learning. This unwavering focus on evidence from what students are actually doing in the classroom promotes systematic and intentional inquiry into what *really* works to deepen student understanding and raise student achievement.

Finally, the formative walkthrough process fosters collaborative inquiry as it advances professional learning and informs next-step improvement decisions. Before, during, and after the formative walkthroughs, educators engage in mutual feed-forward conversations aligned with mutual and evidence-based goals for improvement that promote self-assessment and self-regulation as everyone’s most important work.

What follows are insights from our extensive work in schools that inform our understanding. Together, the insights provide a context for the topics, guides, and suggestions found in this book.

Developing a Culture of Systematic and Intentional Inquiry

Insight 1: You don’t get useful information by asking the wrong questions.

The goal of the formative walkthrough process is for educators to move forward by shifting how each person looks at the problem, identifies realistic actions to take, and learns from collective and individual actions. Effective educators must build capacity to raise penetrating questions that challenge current belief systems and underlying assumptions. Rather than looking for quick-fix answers, competent leaders nourish “inquiring systems” that promote collaborative meaning-making and discovery. Because of its systematic

and intentional focus on weighing decisions against evidence from student learning, formative classroom walkthroughs help educational communities navigate the complex waters of teaching and reframe possibilities for students and teachers. They accomplish this through a process of collaborative inquiry framed by the four interrelated elements described in the previous sections—a learning target, a performance of understanding, publicly stated look-fors, and feed-forward information. We have consistently promoted the use of these game-changing components for student learning and achievement (see, for example, Moss & Brookhart, 2009, 2012; Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011, 2013), and it has become abundantly clear to us that the same interrelated elements also raise the quality of professional learning and practice.

Examining student learning in our classrooms and using the information we gather to improve that learning cannot begin with a general point of inquiry, such as *How can we improve writing across the curriculum?* or with investigations into the use or nonuse of a particular strategy, such as *Where are we with integrating the new note-taking format across all lessons?* Investigations such as these yield information about the strategies but bypass questions about the quality of what is being taught in the first place. For example, a social studies teacher can develop his students' capability to use the Cornell note-taking system (Pauk & Owens, 2014) without ever improving the quality of his lessons—the content, the student performances required, and the criteria used to assess learning. And although students may become better note-takers, the direction of the inquiry misses the key issue: what is the quality of the daily history lessons during which the students are taking Cornell notes?

The formative walkthrough process gathers evidence about what is actually happening in each lesson to improve student understanding. Looking for learning inside of practice reveals patterns of professional strength and highlights areas for professional growth. By framing inquiry around what makes a lesson worthwhile and where the lesson resides in a larger learning trajectory (as described in Chapter 4), educators can get to the heart of the matter—the relationship of the lesson being taught to standards and curricular goals; the potential for the lesson's content to develop essential knowledge, skills, and the reasoning processes students need for future learning in this discipline; and the ability of the lesson to meet specific student learning needs by organizing information at the appropriate level of challenge, acknowledging

diversity, and designing learning experiences that yield strong evidence that students have met the lesson's goals.

In addition to looking for a worthwhile lesson, a learning target theory of action fosters increased clarity for collaborative inquiry. It does this by continuously looking for evidence from students that teachers design and share daily learning targets, engage students in a performance of understanding, provide students with things to look for in their work to help them become assessment capable, use the language of the look-fors to frame feedback that is forward looking and keeps student learning moving in the direction of the learning target, involve students in using the learning target and the look-fors in the assessment and regulation of their own learning, and use effective questioning and develop student questioning ability.

These processes shift educators toward a more formative orientation to professional learning that is based in the real classroom work of planning, instruction, and assessment. The focus also helps principals, coaches, and professional learning communities develop individualized learning agendas that make sense for each educator based on that individual's current strengths and needs. And it helps principals and coaches engage with teachers in collaborative inquiry to make problem solving explicit and public.

Formative Walkthroughs and Observations

Insight 2: Many principals, administrators, and coaches employ walkthrough and observation protocols that are out of step with coaching professional learning.

We can illustrate this insight through the parable of “new wine in old wineskins.” Deconstructing the parable's meaning helps to make our point. Two thousand years ago people stored their wine in bladders fashioned from the skins of goats or sheep. Over time, the wine would ferment inside the skins, causing the skins to expand to their limit and eventually turn brittle. It was unthinkable to reuse an old skin to hold new wine. The wine would spoil or leak and either way become lost.

The parallels between the wineskin parable and the current state of classroom walkthroughs are particularly clear to us. Most walkthroughs cast the principal, coach, or other observer as the “evaluator-in-chief” who

looks for certain instructional strategies and then monitors their use (Moss & Brookhart, 2013). Typically these walkthrough formats use a checklist of instructional practices that ask observers to look for the degree to which things such as “student engagement,” “directions shared verbally and in writing,” and “objectives of the lesson are clearly posted” are being enacted. These typical protocols yield surface-level information and do little to inform decisions about the depth and quality of student learning regardless of whether the observers use iPads or other handheld technologies to record what is seen and provide timely results to teachers. New technology with old thinking is new wine in old wineskins. It is far from the formative walkthrough process we describe in Chapter 2.

Following the chapter on the formative walkthrough process, we describe a framework for professional feedback that helps educators create collegial spaces of learning and high academic outcomes (Chapter 3). Then we unpack each concept of the formative walkthrough, covering one concept per chapter (Chapters 4 through 10). Each chapter describes the specific concept that we suggest educators look for in daily lessons and what they will learn by looking for it, and provides examples and nonexamples to clarify the level of quality that counts as evidence that the concept is alive and well in the lesson. We provide examples to illustrate how to look for each concept separately and in combination with the other concepts of the formative walkthrough. We also offer suggestions for moving teachers forward to the next level of professional growth should misunderstandings exist. Additionally, Chapters 4 through 10 include Collaborative Inquiry Guides that organize specific look-fors for each concept to help gather strong evidence from what students are actually doing during the lesson to inform decisions about the effect of instruction on the quality of student learning. Individual teachers, principals, and coaches can use the guides to promote the self-assessment and self-regulation of their own practice. And the guides can be used for peer study or by professional learning communities to promote collaborative inquiry and mutually relevant goal setting.

Taken together, the Collaborative Inquiry Guides can be used as a comprehensive walkthrough or observation framework that can guide schoolwide improvement for student learning. The individual guides can be used in a variety of combinations to tailor classroom walkthroughs and observations to

the unique needs of a district, school, grade level, subject, or teacher. Chapter 11 provides examples and strategies for doing just that.

Collaborative, Feed-Forward Conversations

Insight 3: Information becomes feedback only when the person receiving it recognizes it as such and uses it to improve his or her work.

This insight holds true for students as well as educators. If the person receiving the feed-forward information never uses it, no matter how carefully the information is worded, that statement simply remains a comment. The formative walkthrough process promotes the use of effective feedback and collaborative dialogue as the engine that drives new learning. And although it is true that effective feedback can drive learning, it is just as true that ineffective, confusing, or generic feedback can derail it.

Sadly, many educators who choose or are assigned a supervisory or coaching role rarely have the knowledge or skills to give good feedback to their peers and colleagues. And too often traditional walkthroughs are followed by conversations that have little effect on student learning. There is a huge difference between an effective feedback episode and just chatting with a teacher. The framework for feedback we offer in Chapter 3 describes how to design and share feedback that is formative, forward looking, and targeted. Intentionally, it has the same elements that we suggest educators look for in classrooms to make sure students receive high-quality feedback from their teachers. We believe that collaborative conversations should provide teachers with the same nonjudgmental, descriptive, and supportive feedback that we expect them to give to their students.

One final point about feedback: it can come from multiple sources, including colleagues, coaches, principals and supervisors, and oneself. For example, if you are a teacher creating a portfolio to document your own growth or are engaged in self-study, you can compare your present levels of understanding and practice with the criteria organized in the Collaborative Inquiry Guides through careful self-observation, self-assessment, and self-directed learning. Principals and others who coach professional learning can do the same by looking for the effect of their coaching on student learning. With that in mind, we have organized the book to be of use to those of you who are self-coaching, whether you are a teacher, principal, coach, or other

administrator. Use the individual chapters to draw conclusions about your own practice that are fair and accurate based on your effect on student learning. Compare your current practice with our descriptions of highly effective classroom practices to decide where you are now as compared to where you want to be, and then choose the realistic next level of work that will move you forward.

Becoming Evidence-Based Goal-Setters and Goal-Getters

Insight 4: SMART goals—ones that are specific, measurable, attainable/achievable, relevant/realistic, and time-bound—are useless unless they are also the right goals.

Think back to our previous example about teaching students to take Cornell notes. Setting and pursuing a SMART goal of increasing students' use of Cornell notes would do little to deepen student understanding of history if the notes they were required to take were about surface-level details and verbatim definitions.

A second example that illustrates what happens when educators pursue the wrong goal involves a group of elementary teachers who were planning a unit on the language arts concept of “compare and contrast.” They were using a story from their textbook about Machu Picchu. They worked with the literacy coach, who suggested techniques for grouping students, teaching vocabulary words, and weaving nonfiction text into their daily lessons. They created a group of lessons to enhance student understanding about the facts of this ancient ruin so students could better compare Machu Picchu to their hometown. The first lesson was about food and celebrations; the second was about how the people dressed; a third explained how the people organized the city into three areas—agricultural, urban, and religious; a fourth examined theories about who inhabited the city; and the final lesson explored why citizens abandoned their city one hundred years after they built it. The teachers designed quizzes and tests about these facts to document how well students understood Machu Picchu.

As you read through the example, did you notice how far the teachers had veered off their intended path—teaching students how to compare and contrast? In their flurry of activity to plan lessons, tasks, and tests, no

one—not even the literacy coach—noticed that they were now aiming for the wrong goals.

The formative walkthrough process uses a learning target theory of action to bring clarity to the goals educators pursue collectively and individually, to help them define the criteria they will use to gather evidence of student learning along the way, and to ensure that they stay the course.

Promoting Self-Assessment and Self-Regulation of Professional Learning

Insight #5: Measuring success begins by choosing the right yardstick.

Regrettably, the metric we commonly use to measure the effect of coaching teachers is to observe their instruction to gather evidence that they have embedded our suggested strategies in their teaching. Every part of their professional learning, then, becomes an exercise of addition—adding new strategies, methods, or techniques to what already exists in the classroom. No wonder teachers often express their weariness by asking, “When am I supposed to have time to do this?”

A clear purpose of this book is to draw stark attention to the importance of gathering minute-by-minute evidence of increased student learning to support any conclusions about successful instruction, supervision, coaching, or educational leadership. Educators involved in observing and coaching teachers—the teachers being coached and those who coach them—must stop admiring instructional practices and begin looking for what students are actually doing, saying, making, and writing during lessons. We must agree on a new yardstick. The measure of successful professional learning must be improved student learning. The measure of successful coaching must be improved student learning. The measure of effective school administration must be improved student learning. A formative walkthrough process can help all educators adopt the metric of improved student learning of rigorous and important content to guide their personal, classroom, and schoolwide improvement efforts.

In the next chapter we examine the components of the formative walkthrough itself. And unlike walkthroughs that focus on supervising and improving instruction, draw the distinction that formative walkthroughs

focus like a laser beam on improving student learning. It's a difference that makes all the difference!



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