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Observation in Teacher Performance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Obserwacja w pracy nauczyciela w czasie pandemii COVID-19

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present issues related to the application of observation in the work of the teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, and beyond. It was assumed that the efficiency, offensiveness and initiative of the teacher operating in dynamic conditions will influence its selection making it an efficient, necessary and effective tool supporting the profession. The use of observation and its various techniques and tools will prove the teacher to be an informed and responsible observer to those observed. Through the advantages and shortcomings of observation discussed, issues relating to planning instrumental and conceptualizing activities will be shown. Gathering and interpreting data will bring about workshop improvement and development by providing a hint of teacher's modifications and attitudes towards the transforming environment.

Keywords: observation; observation tools; teacher; COVID-19

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie zagadnień związanych z zastosowaniem obserwacji w pracy nauczyciela w czasie pandemii COVID-19 i nie tylko. Założono, że sprawność, ofensywność i inicjatywa nauczyciela działającego w dynamicznych warunkach wpływa na dobór obserwacji, czyniąc z niej wydajne, potrzebne i efektywne narzędzie wspierające wykonywany zawód. Korzystanie z obserwacji i jej różnorodnych technik i narzędzi pozwala stwierdzić, że nauczyciel jest świadomym i odpowiedzialnym obserwatorem uczniów. Poprzez omówione zalety i niedoskonałości obserwacji w opracowaniu zaprezentowano kwestie odnoszące się do planowania instrumentalnych i konceptualizacyjnych czynności. Gromadzenie i interpretowanie danych pozwala na usprawnienie warsztatu i rozwój, stanowiąc niejako podpowiedź w zakresie modyfikacji i nastawień nauczyciela wobec przekształcającego się otoczenia.

Słowa kluczowe: obserwacja; narzędzia obserwacji; nauczyciel; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The teaching profession in all circumstances requires improvement of acquired skills and competencies. This is due to the need to adapt to dynamic and fluid educational challenges and aspirations. They direct the increase of educational results of students and their better preparation for the external infrastructure and market needs. These arguments affect the scope of teachers' duties, making it clear that the one who teaches others must be a good professional. He should be able to solve various methodological and methodical problems arising not only in the real educational context and time, but also in specific conditions. It has created a unique world for each individual, as well as for education and the tasks undertaken in it. The uncommon and unique situation of the epidemic initially caused horror and embarrassment. As time passed, this peculiar situation triggered an intense search in the teacher and school authorities for an educational strategy relating to the implementation of the educational process.

The existing achievements in the field of modern technologies were utilized, enabling the adaptation of electronic platforms for remote learning. The gap in the use of not only known methods, forms and means of educational work, but also e-learning was filled (Grant, 1991; Carr-Chellman, 2004; Clarke, 2007).

E-learning effectively began to support education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its implementation was combined with the introduction of transformations in the familiar organisation of the teacher's work and the teaching and learning process. A new school landscape emerged which revealed the readiness of teachers and students to quickly adapt to cope with a different situation. In order to mitigate its undesirable effects, the teacher was offered training to improve his professional aptitude. This involved:

- direct or indirect updating of knowledge related to the provision of information, as well as the elimination of unnecessary information,
- enrichment of knowledge, including learning new ways to pass learning,
- learning how to use educational packages and their application possibilities,
- creating an exchange of thoughts, ideas, solutions, as well as listening to lectures,
- searching for their own individual forms of teacher activity, organizing professional activities,
- observing the closer and further educational environment, which was limited to a computer screen, where pathological and undesirable behaviour was observed.

The above-mentioned factors relate in a fundamental layer to the fulfillment of the teacher's duties and the development of his/her workbench, which was diver-

sified during the pandemic by individual design of substantive activities (Kabat, 2017, pp. 115–131).

The COVID-19 epidemic, unleashed across the globe, reorganized teachers' thinking about their profession in an unstable school setting. It began to foster observation of others and of oneself by triggering specific reflection. It orchestrated the disclosure of hidden talents and abilities, as well as exposed shortcomings and regress in teacher performance. It was rightly pointed out by Czarniecki, who wrote that "teacher's imperfections cannot be replaced by »intuition« or »common sense«, but one should make a concrete activity and effort" (Czarniecki, 1999, pp. 157–162). The quoted sentence with a justified criticism of the teacher will perhaps trigger in them not despair, but the potential that will inspire him to participate in organized training and self-improvement of acquired qualifications.

In this text, the important purpose of the considerations undertaken are issues connected not so much with methodological matters, but with the use of methodological knowledge by the teacher. A special role has been assigned to observation, which provides an opportunity to maximize gains in the responsible and prudent estimation of school events, to get to know students more thoroughly, to make modifications to the process of teaching and learning, and thus to minimize risks and make the activity of educational partners more attractive, even in such a difficult time of pandemic.

OBSERVATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO THE TEACHER

Observation is a simple, easy, yet purposeful method used by the teacher. It is used in everyday teaching and educational activities, as well as in research. It is important to remember the principles of its use in accordance with the rules with which the teacher has become familiar during his/her studies. The methodological knowledge acquired included observation, which allowed to store data about others, the educational environment, and even about oneself. It leaves a trace in memory, which is gradually degraded. To minimize its loss, assistance is needed in planning instrumental and conceptualization activities. The following are the most prominent:

- formulation of the object and purpose of implementation,
- choosing the type of observation necessary in the planned course of action,
- determining the way of interpreting the collected data,
- finding a way to complement the set of used methods, techniques and research tools,

- preparing documentation of the descriptions made of facts, events, processes occurring in the selected fragment of the school's true and virtual reality,
- using natural knowledge from observations about the object,
- determining the situation, conditions and choice of area and people observed,
- constructing the schedule of observations adequate to the selected time and conditions.

These components are particularly important for the teacher who determines the type of contact, the number of persons, events, processes observed, the time and scope of the observation, the degree of standardization of the observed behaviors, and the form of recording. It is worth remembering that it is important to look at a person not in terms of grades for individual subjects, but as a unique being whom one wishes to get to know. In this way it will be possible to help the person develop more effectively.

Looking through the *PWN Dictionary of Foreign Words* we find the definition of observation, which is a considered watching, perceiving something, looking at something, at an object, at a person, or another living being (2015). According to Łobocki, observation is not only the observation of facts or events, but a peculiar way to collect and interpret data in their natural course remaining in the direct range of sight, hearing the observer, which is especially important for the teacher working in familiar and unusual conditions (1982, p. 117). On the other hand, Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) indicate that social sciences, including pedagogical ones grow out of observation. The authors believe that every contact between the teacher and their students begins and ends with observation. This thought of Znaniecki (2001, pp. 223–230) was taken over by the above-mentioned researchers, stating that its advantage is directness allowing the observer to study behaviors, reactions during their course and answer the question of what and how to observe? The key issue in this area is that the teacher specifies the purpose for which he or she appropriately selects the methods, techniques and tools.

Their selection and application takes into account either an active intervention in the observed phenomenon or a passive attitude focused on collecting interesting facts. Data recording focuses on recording everything that the teacher will be able to notice or circle on a prepared sheet. In view of this, observation must be characterized by objectivity, planning, selectivity, and accuracy (Babska, 1969, Chapter 4). Similar properties were pointed out by the authors of Wikipedia who state that it is a way of conducting research that does not involve changes in the observed environment. It can be a part of scientific observation, which is the result of careful and purposeful observation, resulting in a valuable description of phenomena or facts of fundamental importance (www1).

Observation is the oldest working method of scientific and methodical work of the teacher. Its elements and specific techniques are described by authors in many studies. If properly prepared, it provides valuable information on various issues, events occurring in the school environment. It can decide to make a kind of observation guide of students, being a valuable source of knowledge for the teacher. On its basis, it will confirm or deny the previously formulated opinions or hypotheses, resulting from the problems posed. They will include news and facts about students' strengths and weaknesses, needs, achievements, failures, difficulties, stress, troubles, and other issues related to everyday school life. These issues will be explored using a variety of observation techniques.

Pilch and Bauman note that the essence of research techniques lies in the implementation of cognitive activities involving the teacher in data collection (2008, p. 83). It is extremely important to choose an appropriate research technique and tool. Methodological literature offers the teacher a rich repertoire in this regard. A sample set of these is given in the figure below.

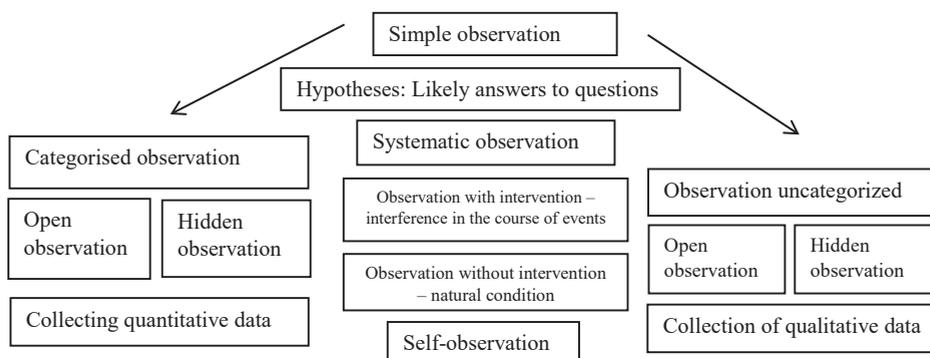


Figure 1. Research tools and techniques

Source: Author's own study based on (Sztumski, 2008, p. 48 and Shughnessy et al., 2002, pp. 100–112).

The choice of observation technique and tool is clearly related to the specified or unspecified goals and categories. In the first case we use, for example: the technique of categorized observation typical for quantitative analyses. In the second case we rather look for information of qualitative character, which enables us to probe intentions, desires, thoughts of the observed. Here, scientific cognition acquires the characteristics of intersubjectively verifiable, i.e. the kind of cognition where it is difficult to repeat the observation in natural conditions due to the change of context, different interactions, persons, which affect the different description of the accumulated multidimensional research material subject to analysis (Silverman, 2010, p. 207, 210, 433). Taking into account the extent and

manner of teacher interference in the observed area, we obtain two types of data. First, there are: uninvolved data, which “have their source in situations that are independent of the researcher’s intervention, e.g. existing documents, written works, etc. Secondly: induced data, resulting from teacher’s intervention, who creates »artificial« conditions in which he or she conducts observation, interviews, experiments, sets up focus groups” (Silverman, 2010, pp. 161–162, 434). We must remember that the data obtained are in some part constructed by the problem, theory, or purpose of the observation posed (Grobler, 2008, pp. 70–71, 90). Each of these modalities plays a priority role in the material production process, as stated by Tracy (2013, pp. 157–183) or Rapley (2010, p. 34). It involves discovering, collecting and discarding unnecessary information or facts and leaving only those needed to guide the essential analysis. All the activities are absorbed by the teacher who tries to complete the documents. Their quality and quantity will indicate the degree of involvement as an observer. The teacher may use either overt or covert observation in their activities. It will depend on the contacts undertaken with the observed persons, their number, the time of observation, as well as the designated content range.

The above-mentioned elements are considered individually by each teacher, taking into account the environmental context, the specificity of the educational institution imprinting the profiles of students. For this purpose, free observation can be utilized to gather general knowledge about the object of observation, with the benefit for future planning, starting with simple observation, which then turns into systematic and scientific observation. However, for the teacher the most important thing is to see the students who are interested in different tasks and their solution during the didactic process initiated during the lessons and extra-curricular activities. There the abilities, possibilities and talents worth knowing are revealed, which can be found in self-observation. A supplementary technique to observation used by the teacher is written documentation. This includes those already created such as letters, announcements, diaries, rules and regulations, web sites, video diaries, social media posts, orders, or observation logs. Diaries are the oldest technology known to man. Their design involves recording all information continuously and systematically and using it as needed. If the teacher introduces transformation to this method by setting a time period, then the exploration will include known and unusual conditions, events, people gaining a photographic character. Often the photographic observation is the starting point for using the time sampling method. It defines the duration of observation and establishes the category key for analyzing interesting facts or phenomena. The method of notation depends on the purpose of the research, in which the breakdown of observable behavior is indicated. The prepared observation plan is sometimes not fully implemented by the teacher. Help is provided by others trying to support in capturing

the whole complex of student characteristics and compare the obtained verbal, graphic and visual data (Konecki, Chomczyński, 2012, pp. 185–189).

Another way of observation is situational observation. It is realized in the form of either intentional or unintentional observation depending on the goal set, the situation in which the teacher finds himself with his students. In other words, it considers pupils' behavior in natural conditions as well as those caused by teacher's interference. The complex situation initiated in either case by the teacher stimulates a whole range of pupil qualities and deficiencies. The teacher here plays a double role (Kemp, 2001, pp. 527–538). On the one hand, he or she observes the students, and on the other hand, as a person arranging the situation in the didactic-educational process, notes the perceived reactions, their style of action occurring during the class. Particularly valuable are the notes associated with the pupils' work adjusted to the strategy and attitude of the teacher. They are so-called feedback testifying to adaptation or not to the teacher's instructions and professional strengths presented by him. We can get a lot of information in this area not only by using observation alone, but also combined with focus interview (Kabat, 2016; Pickard 2007, p. 249). The following table briefly characterizes these.

Table 1. Similarities and differences of observation types

Observation Log	Photo observation	Time sample observation	Time sampling	Situational observation	Self-observation
Recording of continuous behaviour Recording of certain phenomena	Continuous recording, uninterrupted over a period of time	Recording in time intervals e.g. 2, 5, 10 minutes or even seconds. It is performed by several observers at the same time	Waiting for interesting behaviors to emerge	Recording of triggered behaviors	Behavioral recording as a result of reactions of influencing others – the dual role of the teacher and awareness of mistakes made
The time of observation is determined by the observer, i.e. the starting moment and the duration of the observation	The observation time is determined by the observer	The time of observation is determined by the observer, i.e. the starting moment and the duration of the observation	The observation time is determined by the situation	The time of observation is determined by the situation or the observer	Time is determined by the teacher and the situation

Observation Log	Photo observation	Time sample observation	Time sampling	Situational observation	Self-observation
Recording of behavior in everyday language	Recording behavior in everyday language; use of symbols	Recording behavior according to developed categories from photographic observation	Recording behaviors that are a function of situations in everyday language without generalizations and interpretations	Recording all behaviors and specifying the observation plan, recording in common language at the time of the stimulus	Recording students' behavior after the teacher's activity on his/her behavior we get feedback
Recording of behavioral characteristics, unusual changes	Recording of essential behavior and incidental details	Recording of essential behavior	Recording behavior as a function of the situation	Recording all behaviors that occur in a situation	The data record makes you aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the observer

Source: Author's own study based on (Łobocki, 1982).

The table provides information to identify the opportunities and drawbacks associated with choosing a particular type of observation. On this basis, a form of observation is developed that will allow it to be used as effectively as possible. Each of them will lead to the collection of material of interest to the teacher, at the same time, providing a basis for its interpretation. As noted by Łobocki, interpretation is equivalent to drawing conclusions based on observed data, which we explain using collected facts, phenomena or processes. We answer questions about the causes and effects of students' actions in known educational conditions, what their motivation is or lack thereof, what their relations with colleagues are like, how they cooperate, what difficulties they face, ect. The vastness of the observed issues should not affect the conclusions of the data, because it is necessary to take into account "a large and diverse amount of material, knowledge of psychological knowledge, and the attitude of the observer" (Łobocki, 1982, pp. 117–148; Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, 1996 pp. 220–240). We must remember that, like any method, observation has its cognitive limitations. This is due to the choice of a particular technique which has advantages as well as disadvantages. However, with its help the teacher acquires invaluable material subject to quantitative, qualitative or mixed elaboration, as written by Creswall (2014). The data acquired with great meticulousness by the teacher for interpretation may have subjective features. This is dictated by multiple errors, chief among which is the error of premature in-

terpretation. This is due to the teacher's prior factual and practical knowledge of students. Rather, he or she should first get to know the students' feelings, thoughts, difficulties and only then write reliable conclusions, as emphasized by Shughnessy et al. (2002). A common mistake is also the superficiality and bias of the observation undertaken, which is combined with the inclusion of selected manifestations of dominance or submissive behaviour of students towards the teacher. This does not fully reflect their actual description.

The teacher rather singles out some bright features of the students and the situation in which they are manifested than report the facts. With this shortcoming there is another mistake – teacher's assumptions about observed object that are not supported by any facts. The distance between teacher and students becomes visible, exposing his autocratic attitude. It is especially disadvantageous for younger pupils as it may influence their later attitude towards the teacher and the subjects taught. Moreover, the individual constitution of the teacher and his or her preferences influence the accuracy, incompleteness and inaccuracy of the observation. These errors may be the result of too much trust in the teacher's memory, which unfortunately is unreliable. Sometimes the teacher is reminded of a previously detected cause of some event, which later he/she considers typical for all observed events. This approach and hasty observation distorts the image of the pupils and their real potential.

Despite the multiple desiderata, the teacher develops data using different types of analysis, sometimes intertwined. However, the chosen type of analysis becomes iterative in nature, indicating that the development of data should not be postponed but carried out on an ongoing basis. Sub-analyses are initiated that cover the emergence of, e.g. important regularities, relationships or dependencies. They suggest what kind of empirical material should be collected by the teacher in further proceedings. The teacher gets a "hint" of what he or she should do next. The indicated steps direct the teacher's observation conducted on the following day, at the same time, determining its success (Silverman, 2010, pp. 191–193). The discussed action steps highlighted by the teacher conducting the observation reveal the time and labor intensive nature of the observation. He successively gains proficiency in its application by rearranging all the activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the designees of observation presented above, the teacher in his professional duties recognizes it as a way worth knowing, especially at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. As any tool, despite its simplicity and its advantages and disadvantages, it contributes to the acquisition of valuable material focused on the

penetration of the situation of students, their school conditions of existence and other perturbations that have now undergone dramatic changes. A great deal of care must be taken in interpreting the essential data and in taking a critical view of them. The weaknesses identified will allow the teacher to be more careful in conducting the observation, which is a hybrid of sorts that integrates a variety of techniques. It should be supplemented with other methods, because then reliable descriptions of interfering facts and phenomena are more likely to emerge.

There will be opportunities to learn a good methodological workshop that is part of the professional development of the teacher, in which successive phases interrelate. These include:

- the phase of methodological patterns, in which the teacher reproduces proven patterns, as well as seeks and sets new directions for action, as happened during the pandemic,
- the phase of creative reflection, which refers to the reflection on one's own behaviour and the results achieved, characteristic of the dynamic times we are currently experiencing, in which observation has acquired a proper sense and format,
- the phase of self-knowledge and self-monitoring of the educational activity performed, in which one recognizes both the opportunities, limitations and gaps in the performance of the teaching profession,
- the phase of creativity, which manifests itself in the pursuit of understanding the surrounding reality, prompting a deeper insight and analysis of what is happening and how the partners in education react to achieve spectacular results, socially desirable, thereby conditioning the transformation of the teacher's educational activity.

The selected personal and infrastructural educational characteristics of teacher development phrases include typical as well as hardly predictable conditions shaped by the pandemic. They brought diverse effects and outcomes of both the teacher and the students' functioning exposing all sorts of shortcomings. They were subjected to total and vigorous observation, thanks to which ambivalent experiences, feelings and reactions were consolidated, revealing personal commitment, energy and enthusiasm on the one hand, and disappointment, anxiety and depression on the other. Therefore, a teacher in all circumstances and at any time should reflect on the surrounding educational reality in order to specify goals and tasks in such a way that they infect others with optimism, positive thinking, faith in better tomorrow. It would be confirmed by observed facts, situations and behaviors of educational participants regardless of the chosen tool or technique.

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