



Practicing What We Preach: Walkthroughs as Formative Assessments

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Abstract

Classroom walkthroughs have traditionally been used as supervisory tools, with principals as evaluators who monitor teacher performance and compliance with “best practices” checklists. Recent scholarship reconceptualizes walkthroughs as formative processes that can support learning for teachers, leaders, and students. This conceptual paper examines how formative classroom walkthroughs (FCWs), as articulated by Moss and Brookhart, align with the International Baccalaureate’s (IB) assessment principles and practices. The IB assessment framework emphasizes not only assessment for learning, but also the use of constructive feedback, positive backwash on teaching, fostering learner agency, and alignment with the learner profile. These features are integral to the IB’s philosophy, ensuring that assessment practices are learner-centered and support both student growth and instructional improvement. Moss and Brookhart’s FCW model puts these IB principles into practice through brief, targeted observations that focus on students’ learning targets, success criteria, demonstrations of understanding, formative feedback, and opportunities for self-assessment. By correlating IB assessment guiding principles with the components of FCWs, this paper proposes a conceptual alignment model and a correlation matrix. These demonstrate how walkthroughs can “practice what we preach” by serving as formative assessments rather than evaluative checklists and illustrate why Moss and Brookhart’s version of walkthroughs is more compatible with IB than traditional approaches. From a communities-of-practice perspective, this paper argues that FCWs should serve as ongoing, collaborative learning opportunities for IB stakeholders rather than isolated compliance checks.

Keywords: Assessment, formative classroom walkthroughs (FCW), International Baccalaureate (IB), communities of practice (CoP), feedback for improvement, instructional leadership

1. Introduction

1.1 Walkthroughs through the years

Walkthroughs are implemented in different ways and go by many names: learning walks, quick visits, drop-ins, or data walks. Observers typically conduct brief visits, often using checklists to collect data on instructional practices and developmental needs. Moss and Brookhart observe that traditional walkthroughs often treat a fixed list of “best practices” as the gold standard, reinforcing three educational myths:

- Assuming principals are expert “evaluators in chief” who already know what good teaching looks like, while only teachers need to keep learning.
- Presuming the existence of universal strategies effective in any classroom, regardless of the content, the context, or the students in question.
- Perpetuating the notion that information about student learning flows from the top down ^[1, p.43].

Across the literature, classroom walkthroughs emerge as flexible but unevenly implemented tools whose impact depends on their design and purpose. David’s early review shows that walkthroughs vary widely in length, participants, focus, and reporting, and that research on their effectiveness is limited ^[2]. The Rand Corporation study she cites found that walkthroughs often benefit observers more than the observed. Boothe notes that most principals believed walkthroughs positively influence student learning and provide useful data for ongoing cycles of instructional improvement ^[3]. Kubicek’s (2015) study shows that principals’ use of walkthroughs, followed by conversations, aligned professional learning with new instructional practices and led to useful feedback for teachers ^[4]. More recent studies, however, treat walkthroughs more directly as tools for improving instruction: Kachur and colleagues portray them as structured chances for observation, reflection, and dialogue ^[5], and Xie *et al.* found that

classroom walkthrough, even during the pandemic lockdowns, was still an effective approach to improve quality in early childhood settings in China [6]. Co and Soriano argue that walkthroughs function as an instructional improvement strategy that can enhance student outcomes by strengthening teachers' instructional practice and providing a rapid check for potential inequities in how instruction is experienced by different students [7]. Dulay's review finds that walkthroughs enhance teaching and student outcomes when they foster reflection, feedback, and collaboration rather than mere compliance [8]. At the same time, the review points to enduring obstacles such as teacher anxiety, uneven implementation, limited preparation for school leaders, and lack of time, which can reduce their impact unless schools adopt consistent procedures and invest in building observers' capacity [8]. Collectively, these studies indicate that walkthroughs are most effective when they transcend compliance monitoring and become systematic, non-evaluative, and dialogic processes that generate actionable feedback for teachers and leaders. This approach is formalized in formative classroom walkthroughs [1, 9-11].

1.2 Formative classroom walkthroughs (FCWs)

Conceptualized by Moss and Brookhart, formative classroom walkthroughs directly counter the myths of traditional walkthroughs. FCWs position teachers as active partners in inquiry rather than passive subjects of evaluation. Observers "sit in the student's seat" and focus on three questions: where the learner is heading, where the learner is now, and what will close the gap between the two [1]. In their 2015 book, Moss and Brookhart elaborate seven key learning components that attend first to student learning rather than to generic checklists of teacher behaviors:

- Worthwhile lesson
- Learning target
- Performance of understanding
- Success criteria (look-fors)
- Formative feedback
- Student self-assessment
- Effective questioning [9].

Additionally, Moss and Brookhart describe three "views" of feedback that are work-focused and oriented toward future growth. These can be summarized as follows:

First, at the micro level, feedback relates to its specific content and qualities, including the language used and the choices made about its delivery to teachers.

Second, in the short-term sense (snapshot), feedback provides insights for both the observer and the teacher about what is happening in classroom learning at that moment.

Third, from a long-term perspective, feedback addresses the ongoing development resulting from this input - offering direction for subsequent steps and helping both teachers and principals clarify how to advance [11].

A further strength of Moss and Brookhart's model is that it explicitly names these visits as formative classroom walkthroughs. In working with students, IB educators distinguish between formative and summative assessments and use that language accurately: formative tasks are low stakes checks for understanding that prepare students for summative assessments and function as assessments for learning, not simply assessments of learning. By labelling

walkthroughs themselves as formative, the FCW model mirrors this distinction and signals to teachers that the primary purpose of these visits is learning and preparation, not judgement.

1.3 Research question and objective

This paper inquires into the key factors that enable a brief classroom visit to become a meaningful professional learning experience, with a particular focus on how formative classroom walkthroughs (FCWs) can support teacher development in International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. To address this aim, the study investigates how the FCW model can be applied to put IB's assessment guiding principles into practice. To achieve these objectives, the paper (a) clarifies and analyzes central IB assessment philosophy and pedagogy, (b) reviews and synthesizes research on FCWs and related walkthrough practices, (c) applies the theoretical lens of communities of practice, and (d) develops and presents a conceptual alignment model and a correlation matrix that systematically link IB assessment guiding principles to FCW-specific components.

2. Resources and Procedures

2.1 IB assessment framework and its connection to FCWs

The IB document *Assessment principles and practices: Quality assessments in a digital age* sets out the organization's overarching view of assessment across programs. It emphasizes that assessment should be valid, fair, and accessible, and that it must support program coherence and align with the IB mission and learner profile rather than merely serve grading functions [12]. The companion guide, *Teaching and learning informed by assessment in the Diploma Programme*, describes formative assessments in which teachers clearly communicate learning goals and success criteria, gather evidence of students' current understanding, provide actionable feedback, and foster classroom environments where students support each other and take greater ownership of their own learning [13]. These strategies do not simply describe technical steps; they reflect a broader commitment to student agency, transparency, and learning-oriented use of assessment information.

Moss and Brookhart's formative classroom walkthrough (FCW) model resonates strongly with this view. The FCW protocol directs observers to look for clearly communicated learning targets, opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding in meaningful ways, the presence and use of formative feedback, and systematic attention to both peer- and self-assessment [9, 11]. In practical terms, these "look-fors" put into practice the formative principles the IB advocates. Rather than seeing walkthroughs as stand-alone evaluation instruments, the FCW model weaves them into the comprehensive assessment-for-learning framework that underpins IB guidance.

2.2 Theoretical framework

This study uses the Communities of Practice (CoP) framework as its main perspective for interpreting formative classroom walkthroughs in IB schools. Lave and Wenger first described CoPs in their work on situated learning, showing how newcomers learn through "legitimate

peripheral participation” in the shared activities of more experienced members^[14]. Wenger later conceptualizes CoPs as social systems in which learning is understood as participation in shared practice and identity is shaped through engagement with a community’s enterprise^[15]. Communities of practice are described in terms of three interrelated elements: a domain (a shared area of concern or passion), a community (people who care about this domain and learn together), and a practice (a repertoire of tools, stories, routines, and ways of addressing recurring problems)^[15, 16].

Formative classroom walkthroughs align closely with this framework. In IB schools, the domain around which a CoP can form is student learning and formative assessment, including the distinction between formative and summative assessment and the enactment of IB assessment principles in everyday classroom practice. The community consists of IB educators - teachers, coordinators, and leaders - who engage in FCWs, share their observations, and collectively seek to improve teaching and learning. Over time, these educators develop a practice that includes shared walkthrough

protocols, common language (learning targets, success criteria, “sitting in the student’s seat”), repeated observation routines, and familiar ways of interpreting evidence and giving feedback^[1, 9, 11].

Viewed from this perspective, each FCW is a social learning event in which community members examine evidence of student learning, negotiate effective formative practices, and refine shared routines. Drawing on CoP theory, the paper argues that, rather than simply fulfilling requirements, the IB community engages in ongoing, collaborative learning through formative classroom walkthroughs.

3. Results

3.1 Conceptual alignment model

Figure 1 shows the conceptual alignment of IB assessment principles with FCWs. The IB principles (Box 1) guide the FCW processes (Box 2), which, in turn, influence outcomes for both teachers and students (Box 3). The feedback loop highlights how insights from FCWs can enhance curriculum delivery and assessment practices.

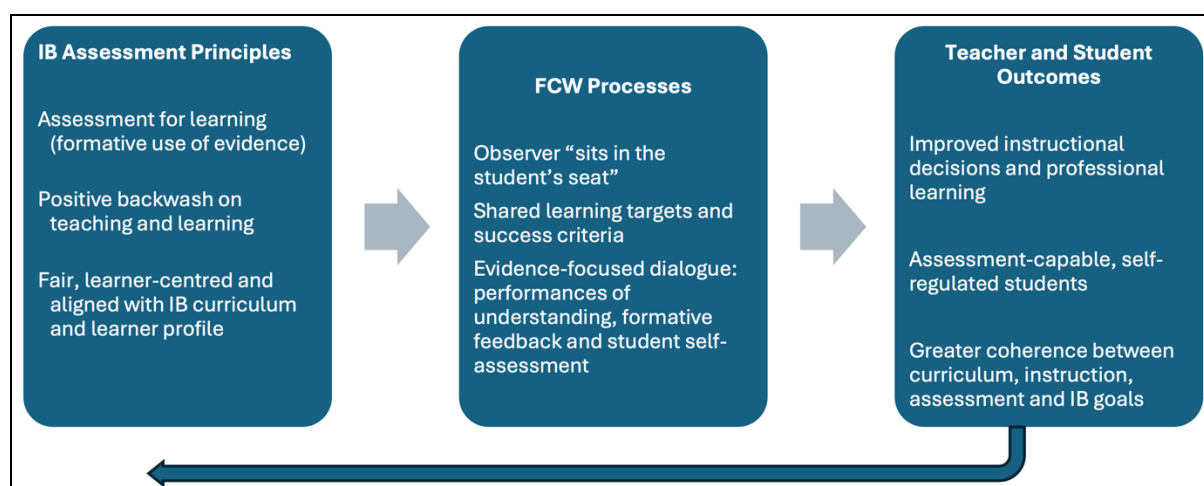


Fig 1: Conceptual alignment of IB assessment principles with FCW

3.2 Correlation matrix

Table 1 is a correlation matrix aligning individual IB

principles with specific FCW components and practical “look-fors” an observer might use.

Table 1: IB assessment principles and FCW components

IB Assessment Guiding Principles	FCW Focus	Walkthrough look-for
Assessment for learning	Learning targets and success criteria	Students know what they’re learning and how success is judged
Positive backwash on teaching and learning	Performance of understanding	Students show thinking, not just complete tasks
Student agency	Self- and peer assessment	Students use criteria to improve their work
Fairness and feedback for improvement	Formative, forward-looking feedback	Feedback gives next steps learners can act on
Coherence and alignment across the programs	Use of walkthrough data in teams	Patterns from visits inform planning and PD
Instructional leadership and shared responsibility	Observers as co-learners and coaches	Post-walkthrough talk focuses on reflection, not ratings

4. Discussion

4.1 Formative assessment and assessment for learning

The IB situates formative assessment as “assessment for learning”, emphasizing its close link to how students learn and its integration with teaching^[12, 13]. Moss and Brookhart similarly describe formative assessment as an intentional

process in which teachers and students gather evidence with the explicit goal of improving achievement^[1, 9]. In Figure 1 and Table 1, this principle is operationalized through FCW look-fors that focus on clear learning targets, explicit success criteria, and students’ ability to explain what they are learning and how they will know they have succeeded.

Recent studies indicate that assessment for learning is a prominent focus in contemporary research. Othman and colleagues' review of the literature showed that *assessment for learning* accounted for about three-quarters of the articles, with *assessment as learning*, and *assessment of learning* each representing around 12% [17]. Arnold's study further shows that students appreciate assessment for learning when success criteria are clear, and they have genuine chances to use feedback to improve [18], which is precisely the kind of classroom culture that FCWs seek to reveal and reinforce.

4.2 Performances of understanding and positive backwash

The IB assessment design aims to promote positive backwash, supporting rich teaching and learning instead of narrow test drilling [12]. FCW operationalizes IB's assessment design by concentrating on "performances of understanding": observers focus on students as they explain, apply, create, or reason, rather than simply complete assigned tasks [1, 9, 11]. When walkthroughs consistently foreground these performances, they help align everyday classroom work with the deeper learning outcomes valued by the IB.

4.3 Student agency, self-assessment, and the learner profile

The IB learner profile attributes describe students as inquirers, thinkers, and reflective learners who take responsibility for their own learning [12, 13]. Assessment is expected to support this agency by making the criteria transparent while encouraging student self-regulation. Self-assessment is a key component of FCW: observers focus on how students are using success criteria and look-for to evaluate and improve their work [9, 11]. Observers place themselves in students' perspectives and ask student-centered questions such as "*Where am I headed? Where am I now? What closes the gap?*" [5]. In IB classrooms, student agency is front and center of formative assessment: peer and self-assessment are key approaches, and students are supported to think critically by evaluating what quality work looks like, drafting success criteria, and engaging in meaningful exchanges of feedback [13]. Arnold's review of 75 empirical studies attests to this - students experience assessment for learning most positively when they can understand and use criteria and feedback to improve [17]. FCWs highlight these elements and invite shared reflection, serving as a link between the IB's learner profile and daily classroom practice.

4.4 Fairness, transparency, and feedback-forward

IB guidance stresses the importance of assessment being fair and transparent. Moreover, it should provide feedback that feeds forward, helping learners recognize their current level of achievement and make informed decisions about how to improve [12]. Within this framework, evidence is not an end in itself; it is useful only when converted into action for improvement. Moss and Brookhart make a parallel point about FCW data: descriptions of classroom practice do not become "evidence" until they are used to improve teacher, student, and administrator learning and achievement. Their three "views" of feedback (micro, snapshot, long view)

highlight the need for specific, work-focused feedback that is clearly tied to future learning. In Table 1, the IB principle of fairness and feedback is linked to FCW look-fors that ask whether feedback is descriptive and forward-looking, and whether students can act on feedback during or after the lesson.

4.5 Instructional leadership, communities of practice, and shared responsibility

IB assessment principles operate at system and school levels; leaders are responsible for aligning assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy, and for promoting a culture in which assessment is part of learning rather than merely grading [12, 13]. The literature on walkthroughs shows that leadership stance is crucial. Walkthroughs are most constructive when their purpose is clear, they are carried out in a climate of trust, and they are embedded in a broader professional learning strategy [2, 6]. Evidence from Xie et al., Kubicek, Co and Soriano, and Dulay suggests that walkthroughs most effectively support improvement when they foster reflection, feedback, collaboration, and teacher well-being [4, 6-8].

Viewed through a communities-of-practice lens, FCWs are among the core routines through which an IB staff community does its learning work: teachers and leaders come together around a shared domain (student learning and assessment), examine classroom evidence, and refine collective practice over time. Moss and Brookhart explicitly re-position leaders as co-learners; administrators, peers, and coaches can all serve as observers, and walkthroughs are intended to benefit all participants and feed professional learning [1, 9, 11]. This stance aligns with IB's emphasis on professional judgement, collaboration, and assessment in service of program goals rather than ranking teachers or students [12, 13].

5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that classroom walkthroughs can serve as formative assessments that embody IB assessment guiding principles when intentionally designed and implemented in accordance with Moss and Brookhart's framework. Drawing on IB's guidance on assessments and the FCW and walkthrough literature, the conceptual alignment model (Figure 1) and correlation matrix (Table 1) illustrate how IB principles - assessment for learning, positive backwash, learner agency, fairness and feedback, coherence, and shared leadership - correspond to FCW components such as learning targets, performances of understanding, success criteria, feedback, student self-assessment, and collaborative professional learning.

Grounded in communities-of-practice theory, this paper contends that FCWs should be understood as recurring social learning events through which IB teachers and leaders, functioning as a professional community, strengthen their collective capacity to regularly implement assessment for learning. As a practical next step, IB schools could pilot FCWs on a small scale to collect evidence on the quality of post-walkthrough reflection and changes in classroom feedback practices. Then, future research might systematically examine the long-term effects of FCW implementation on collaboration, instruction, assessment practices, and professional development. Furthermore, by

sharing experiences within IB networks and platforms, schools can collaboratively refine FCW routines and contribute to a broader community of practice dedicated to formative, learning-oriented walkthroughs.

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