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Professional development
through classroom visits

Observation- Handbook for Teachers



Lesson observation
and quality feedback



Rolf Gollob & Wiltrud Weidinger

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classroom visits**

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“It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity, there is beauty, and there is strength.”

Maya Angelou

“The greater the diversity, the greater the perfection.”

Thomas Berry

An important element of the REFLECT project was the piloting phase of the materials in Moldova and the close cooperation with the highly committed teachers, school managers, regional trainers, and national inspectors from District Education Departments and the three participating pilot schools in Costești (North), Grozești (Center) and Olănești (South). Not only did they contribute to innovative learning materials, but were also part of a democratic and participatory process of school development. Our sincere thanks go to all of them, and especially to:

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Introduction

This **Observation Handbook** provides support for giving lesson observations and quality feedback in the form of a practical guide.

The additional **Good Teaching and Learning** manual provides an insight into the most important aspects of quality teaching and learning. It serves as a foundation for peer teachers, principals, trainers and inspectors and provides hints for quality lessons.

The Observation Handbook you have in your hands has a clear purpose: whenever new subjects are developed, new teaching materials have to be created or principles of teaching and learning are changed, meaning teachers have to develop themselves, undergo further training and implement new concepts. This cannot be done just a short or longer training alone - it needs application and, above all, a lot of time.

What is important is that teachers have the opportunity to be visited and observed, and to receive feedback. Feedback has been on everyone's lips for years and there has been a broad consensus about the best conditions in which feedback can unfold its learning-promoting potential in the school context.

Currently, feedback is considered one of the most effective interventions for promoting learning and development processes. It is seen as a way of providing teachers with the best possible individual support according to their potential.

It is interesting to note that younger teachers, who have been taught new methods and new content during their initial training, do not readily use them in their lessons. Teachers have a tendency, especially in the early stages of professional practice, to apply those concepts of teaching that they themselves experienced as students. This mechanism helps to find a solution in uncertain moments, but often prevents necessary innovation. However, when they are observed and their teaching is described and reported back, a mirror is held up to them and they have the opportunity to undergo personal and professional development.

The same is even more true for experienced teachers when they return to the classroom after trainings. Without the help of classroom visits from colleagues, trainers and inspectors, there is a danger that they fall back into old, familiar routines.

What teachers need is not criticism or top-down proposals but a reflection of their own actions, good and sound evidence-based feedback. This manual serves this purpose. It helps give some background information on what is needed for the collegial classroom visit and what approach should be taken. Above all, however, it should be a practical tool to plan lesson visits carefully, to realise them well and to approach the most important phase – the feed-back – in a sensible and effective way.

In order for everyone to be able to talk about and ascertain what is understood by good and effective learning today, the basis for the classroom visit is the aforementioned ***Good Teaching and Learning*** manual. There, the basic principles of learning are presented briefly and clearly and reflect current international pedagogical discussions. They also help to implement the Goal 4 of the UN Agenda 2030: quality education for all!

Part I:
Collegial classroom visits concrete

1. Comparing one's own perspective with an outside perspective: when teachers visit their colleagues in the classroom

The constant development of society and life circumstances challenges teachers to further develop their own teaching. It is well known that cooperation among teachers enhances children's learning and their own actions as teachers. Peer observation with subsequent feedback is seen as an obvious and very effective form of quality development in teaching. This is not only about reflecting on the lessons together, but also about learning from each other. Learning from each other has a key function here.

Only those who are willing to use the feedback from their environment for their own further development can be successful in the long run. One possibility is to visit each other in class. Collegial observation can serve to reflect on one's own actions as a teacher as well as take the form of collegial lesson reflections, i.e. the lesson is in the foreground and is reflected upon. Teaching cannot be separated from the teacher. A lesson reflection will always include feedback on the teacher's actions in the lesson. Classroom visits to a colleague, however, rarely happen in everyday school life and are often rejected.

However, if a college begins to cultivate these visits, an exchange between teachers is initiated which should not only improve the quality of their work, but also deepen the collegial relationship and promote team spirit.

This manual points out that observations are the basis of the collegial conversation: it is not just talking about teaching, but the conversation is oriented towards observation data. In this way, the teacher can compare their own perspective with an outside perspective and gets the chance to discover blind spots in their work. Innovations are implemented in the classroom, systematically tested and reflected upon, and teachers develop their own professionalism as well as their own didactics.

2. The collegial classroom visit comprises three elements

A collegial classroom visit is an exchange of experiences between two education professionals. This can be two teachers, or a teacher and someone from the education administration, from an inspectorate, from the school management team or from a training seminar. It is important to note that even with different roles, a collegial classroom visit should not be characterised by hierarchy. At the heart of this approach to lesson observation and feedback is not control and judgement, but professional development for both the visitor and the visited. It is of central importance that each visit is followed up by subsequent feedback, which remains non-judgemental and is carried out according to principles and guidelines that have been mutually agreed upon beforehand.

a) Preliminary discussion/preparation

Reason for the visit, topic/focus of the observation, duration, time, clarification of what is understood by “successful teaching”, etc.

So much of what makes an effective observation takes place before you even step inside the classroom in the role of observer. You need to know the framework you are basing your observation on and are able to communicate it clearly to the visited teacher. Be sure you know what the visited teacher wants to learn, and what they expect from you (see observation form). Be clear about what you expect to see in the classroom, and what you will be observing and giving feedback on. Interpret what you see fairly, and make sure your comments will support, not hurt, and empower, not dishearten.

A classroom is a micro-society in which a culture of democracy can be lived.

b) Lesson visit

Introduction of the observer at the beginning of the lesson and explanation of the reason for the visit. Important: the observer does not actively participate in the lesson.

Instead of observing a teacher teaching a lesson, start out with the idea that you are observing learning. Try to keep this as your emphasis by looking for evidence of all pupils learning in the classroom. Three essential questions guide your observations, your notes, and your feedback:

- ▶ Are the pupils engaged? If not, how long does it take to get them back on task?
- ▶ Does the visited teacher make it clear to the pupils what they should be learning?
- ▶ Classroom participation. Getting pupils to answer questions is a lot more complicated than calling on the first hand to go up. Check to see if the teacher calls for a variety of responses and waits sufficiently to allow more pupils to participate, etc.

c) Feedback and debriefing

Focus on reflection of the lesson seen/held and joint reflections on transfer to future practice.

Be clear with the visited teacher about what you will be observing, and again: take detailed notes, make a positive comment right after the lesson (remember your face and body talk too!), sit together with the visited teacher the same day if possible and be aware that your feedback will be one of the most powerful means of development for the colleague whose class you observed.

3. Classroom visit step by step

Step 1 Observation suggestions

Prior to the lesson, the teacher being observed should provide the visitor with a focus appropriate to the lesson (e.g. "Will I succeed in encouraging the pupils to actively participate? How do I respond to the pupils' contributions? How do I distribute my attention?").

This specific task will ensure the visitor observes in a targeted manner and focuses on aspects that currently concern the teacher being observed. If the teacher is unsure what they need to be observed on, the visitor can support them with suitable suggestions.

Step 2 Observation according to task focus

Before observing lessons, the teacher and the visitor consider how the agreed observation focus can best be observed and recorded (e.g. recording pupils' activities, recording verbal statements, drawing up tally sheets, etc.). During the lesson the visitor takes notes without judging. The notes are converted into a legible form immediately after the lesson observation. The recorded data should allow an evaluation of what happened in class.

Step 3 Reflection and feedback on the lesson using the data

The observation form serves as the basis for the debriefing session between the observer and the teacher face to face. A dialogue develops in which the visitor supports the teacher in reflecting on the lesson. The aim of the conversation is for the teacher to become a reflective practitioner, perceiving and evaluating the results of their own actions, becoming aware of what constitutes good teaching and finding ways to continually improve.

Step 4 Recording the reflection in written form (minutes)

Immediately after debriefing, the visited teacher should write down the main findings. The written reflection should cover two points:

- ▶ a brief description of the lesson and the visitor's observations
- ▶ strategies for future action using the GROW method.

If these four steps are followed, it will help the teacher take responsibility for their own development and – as a result – their own professional future.

4. Proposed forms for preparation, observation and feedback

4.1 Proposed form for preparing to observe a class

Date and time:

School and grade:

Subject and topic:

Taught by:

Observed by:

To be agreed: What do I want to be observed? What is the focus of the observation?

4.2 Proposed form for observing the lesson

Please note that this form is an empty form where the observation focus can be set together with the observed teacher. In sections 4.3–4.6, concrete examples are given for different foci (independent learning, communication, learning environment, learning atmosphere).

Date and time:

School and grade:

Subject and topic:

Name/function of visitor:

Observation (data collection for reflection and feedback)

- ▶ Description of pupil actions/learning.
- ▶ Description of teacher input.
- ▶ Description of time allocation/pace.
- ▶ Description of formative assessment.
- ▶ Description of interaction between teacher and visited teacher, visitors and visited teacher.

Topics I want to bring up during the feedback discussion

Time:	What happens?

Time:	What I observe!

Time:	Questions/comments.

4.3 Proposed form for observing 'Independent learning'

Observer:

Visited teacher:

Date:

Goal: Teacher guides independent learning.

Indicators	Observations
The teacher clearly explains the contents and procedures of the upcoming phase of independent learning.	
The teacher gives clearly formulated work assignments.	
The teacher provides positive and corrective feedback as needed.	
The teacher refers to opportunities for self-monitoring.	
Students find their way around the prepared learning environment.	
Students read the work order independently.	
Students begin working independently.	
Students work with concentration and perseverance.	
Students get help by first asking other students, then the teacher.	

4.4 Proposed form for observing 'Communication'

Observer:

Visited teacher:

Date:

Verbal and non-verbal communication between teacher and student.

Indicators	Observations
The teacher speaks clearly.	
The teacher precisely formulates the tasks.	
The teacher has student responses confirmed or corrected by the students.	
The teacher avoids the teacher echo.	
The teacher supports prompts with appropriate unambiguous gestures.	
The teacher aligns prompting with their own actions.	
The teacher also uses agreed signs instead of words in class.	
Students know the non-verbal signs and respond accordingly.	
The teacher maintains eye contact.	

4.5 Proposed form for observing 'Learning environment (physical and spatial surroundings and materials)'

Observer:

Visited teacher:

Date:

Goal: The classroom is clearly structured.

Indicators	Observations
The room is divided into different areas (partner area, quiet area, reading corner, etc.).	
The students know how to behave in the respective areas.	
Each area used is cleaned/tidied up by the students before leaving.	
The teacher has clearly marked the own area for the students (filing for finished work, etc.).	
The teacher structures the room so that the students can find the materials they need themselves.	
The teacher arranges the tables so that there are both individual and group workstations.	
The materials are accessible to all the students.	
The teacher offers a manageable number of different materials.	
There is space in the room for individual relaxation phases.	

4.6 Observation sheet 'Learning atmosphere (learning climate within the class/group)'

Observer: _____

Visited teacher: _____

Date: _____

The lessons promote concentration and attention.

Indicators	Observations
The majority of students begin the task with visible pleasure.	
Students actively participate in class discussion.	
The teacher motivates students to bring their own ideas into the classroom.	
The teacher encourages mutual listening among students through listening assignments.	
Students find their way around the prepared learning environment.	
Students read the work order independently.	
Students begin working independently.	
Students work with concentration and perseverance.	
Students get help by first asking other students, then the teacher.	

4.7 Proposed form for the visited teacher: what I have learned from the feedback.

Date and time:

School and grade:

Subject and topic:

Name/function of visitor:

Feedback given to me:

The ideas I choose to integrate, and why and how:

Part II:
**Background information for collegial
classroom visits**

1. What the benefits are

Collegial classroom visits allow observed teachers to:

▶	share teaching experiences and organisation;
▶	ask other teachers for advice on difficult situations and problems;
▶	be shown an outside perspective;
▶	gain insight into other didactic-methodological approaches, teaching styles and strategies;
▶	get more self-confidence and inspiration for new things;
▶	give and receive tips and advice on how to improve teaching;
▶	reflect on their own further training needs;
▶	feel supported because interest is shown in their personal development;
▶	develop professionally;
▶	have a clearer idea of their specific training needs;
▶	see their professional self-esteem strengthened;
▶	improve their sense of belonging to the profession;
▶	be encouraged to reflect on their teaching on a regular basis;
▶	benefit from the experience, skills and knowledge of their colleagues, e.g. in terms of different teaching styles, use of resources, classroom management, use of media, differentiation strategies, evaluation and assessment criteria;
▶	identify new ways of working together and jointly develop strategies to better cope with challenging teaching situations and
▶	continuously improve their teaching practice.

2. How they are embedded in the institutional framework

To ensure that collegial classroom visits lead to the desired results:

- ▶ there should be a shared understanding within the institution of what constitutes successful teaching and learning;
- ▶ a willingness to engage in this type of cooperation is required from all parties involved;
- ▶ this form of lesson observation should be actively promoted and supported within the institution and
- ▶ a clear distinction from other forms of lesson observation is essential, especially those that involve assessment of the teaching process.

3. The classroom visits has preconditions

To be effective, a collegial classroom visit must be well-prepared and very professional. But it is not a top-down event.

Therefore, a collegial classroom visit has to follow certain quality standards:

- ▶ It must be constructive.
- ▶ It must be non-judgmental.
- ▶ It must include a confidentiality agreement between the parties involved.
- ▶ It must in no way have consequences in terms of employment relationship/or employment contract.
- ▶ It must take place between persons who consider each other as equals, even though they may have different positions in the field of education.
- ▶ It must involve giving and receiving feedback.
- ▶ It must lead to dialogue that stimulates concrete positive changes.
- ▶ It must be seen as one part of a larger set of measures that helps to continuously improve one's own teaching practice.

4. What to consider during the visit

It is very important that those involved have the same understanding of what constitutes "good" teaching (see resource manual).

As an observer, it is difficult to observe in a non-judgmental way, and it might not be easy for the teacher being observed to understand the actual message, because we are all used to receiving judgmental feedback, whether positive or negative.

Since no evaluations are made, the observer and the observed are able to establish and maintain an appreciative relationship with each other. This makes it possible to build on these good foundations and to work together in a constructive and supportive manner. Possible fears and inhibitions are reduced and the potential for conflict is diminished. The approach also provides a very good basis for further work, enabling the teachers to set themselves clear, realistic future goals and to work on them continuously.

If an assessment "must" be made, the sandwich method is recommended:

In the sandwich feedback method, feedback is first given on positive aspects and then on those where improvement is deemed necessary. This means that positive aspects are mentioned first, the more negative aspects are "packed" in the middle and the positive aspects are mentioned again at the end. This approach might be used when an evaluation seems necessary (rather in case of feedback from the institutions, superiors etc.).

5. Feedback – the most important part for development

During the peer teaching visit, the focus is on the exact observation and documentation of what is seen and heard, taking great care to only note what is actually observed and not to make any evaluations whatsoever.

The observer reports to the teacher exactly – almost film-like – only what she/he has observed.

Example of a helpful observation: "You spoke for five minutes. Pupils started doing other things after about 3 minutes. One pupil was reading. Two were talking and three were checking messages on their cell phones."

Example of a non-helpful assessment: "You spoke for a very long time and in a monotonous tone. The pupils were bored and disinterested."

The aim is to hold up a kind of mirror to the teacher being observed, which can be used for subsequent reflection. This means that the teacher actively examines their own teaching. The observer tries to be as objective as possible and not to make recommendations, assumptions or judgements. This is very difficult for most observers at the beginning, as we are all used to immediately giving an evaluation to what we see/hear. The goal is to share examples of successful practice and thus improve teaching. This conversation has also been shown to be a valuable learning experience for the observer.

Collegial classroom visits are suitable for different settings:

a)	From colleague to colleague: This approach is suitable for colleagues at the same level, i.e. from teacher to teacher.
b)	After training and further education: It can also be used after courses/training/education. Visiting trainers can see what has been learned from the training and whether they themselves should improve their training.
c)	For inspectorates: If inspectorate systems see themselves as institutions for school development, this form of classroom visits also makes good sense for inspectors. However, if teachers are likely to fear judgement, condemnation or negative consequences, this system of observation and feedback cannot be used. Inspectors must see themselves as professional colleagues and not as higher ranking educational specialists.
d)	For the support of young teachers in a school: Young colleagues often have a long period of education behind them in which teaching practice has been more or less neglected. Putting theoretical knowledge into practice needs support from experienced colleagues. Classroom visits and careful and attentive feedback can provide encouragement during their initial entry into teaching.

6. Giving and receiving feedback – planning development

a) Giving feedback

▶	Give verbal feedback immediately after the lesson.
▶	Create an open and pleasant atmosphere.
▶	Open the conversation with an open-ended question such as: How did you feel when you were teaching? Or: How did you feel?...
▶	Leave time to think and reflect.
▶	Be as objective as possible; describe what you saw without making judgments.
▶	Ask questions instead of making statements.
▶	Be specific: the focus is on the goal of the lesson observation.
▶	Comment on the activity, not the person.
▶	Stay on the same level and don't move to a higher one.
▶	Make sure feedback is a two-way process, a dialogue and not a monologue.
▶	Structure the feedback, which should cover all aspects of teaching and learning.
▶	Make it clear that the feedback is yours (could be very different for someone else).
▶	End the conversation by summarising again important points of the conversation or future/set goals for optimising the teaching.

b) Receiving feedback

- ▶ Think again about how the lesson went. What happened? Was it according to your plan? What were you satisfied with, what would you improve?
- ▶ Listen to the observer without interrupting.
- ▶ Be open to discussion and don't take feedback personally.
- ▶ Don't try to justify yourself.
- ▶ Ask questions about the topic and ask if anything is unclear.
- ▶ Show interest in what the observer is saying.
- ▶ Accept that there may be different opinions and views.
- ▶ Reflect on how you can transfer what you've heard to future practice situations.
- ▶ Remember that feedback can be accepted or not.

7. Setting realistic development goals: the G-R-O-W Method

There is a wide range of methods for personal development planning, some better than others. The GROW model is known worldwide and respected by many experts (<https://www.performanceconsultants.com/grow-model>).

Unlike most other coaching models, the GROW model is an approach that helps create the right context to help transform one's potential into new performance. This is precisely the reason why it's so successful.

G Goal

(Ideally this should be agreed in the preliminary meeting); perhaps a different goal will emerge during the visit.

R Reality

This phase helps to identify details of the lesson. The observer identifies some key aspects that could be improved on. (These areas can be the same ones that were addressed during the preliminary meeting or new areas).

O Options

The observer helps the teacher being observed reflect on teaching and identify alternative ways to achieve the relevant goals. The observer takes notes and reminds the observed person(s) of what they said and finally summarises what the teacher being observed decided to do.

W Will/desire

The observer asks questions to help the interviewee find out whether the goals set are realistic and to decide which course of action to take initially. They discuss possible obstacles the observed might face and what means they might use to overcome those obstacles. They also talk about how great the motivation really is to change the teaching practice.

8. A specific feedback method: content-focused coaching (CFC)

As a visitor, one of the most important parts of your job is coaching your trainee. Content-focused coaching will support you in this work through a three-step approach. Together with the teacher being observed, you should first see how much time you have at your disposal and which elements of the CFC model you wish to focus on. The model proposes to a) support preparation of the lesson, b) observe and even take part in the lesson and c) debrief together with the teacher being observed. Before the coaching process is explained here in detail, let us first look at some background information about this internationally tested and implemented method.

CFC: background information

In initial teacher training, the central issue is stimulating learning amongst teachers so that teaching practice can be optimally adapted and constantly improved upon. From a social constructivist perspective on learning and change processes, a successful change only can take place if the learner can 'translate' a proposal, a model or a new insight into his or her personal repertoire of action. Content-focused coaching supports this process of adaptation and learning amongst teachers through the close support by the visitor in the role of a coach. In this role, you work with the teacher in cycles of planning, teaching and reflection. In this way, you help expand the trainee's pedagogical and content knowledge and improve their teaching practice. The aim of CFC is a continuous development of the teachers' repertoire of action competences for the practical field. In a co-creative setting, the elements of planning, implementation and reflection on teaching-and-learning arrangements are worked on together and as equals. Only when teachers being observed understand and can co-create (construct) the learning steps independently, can they adopt a new method or approach into their repertoire of teaching.

In the most fundamental way, CFC must be viewed as a cooperation between the coach and the coached and, as mentioned above, it is important that they meet as equals. Of course, the visitor or coach has a lot more experience than the teacher. But in this profession there is no such thing as being 100% right or wrong. In CFC terminology, this relationship is referred to as 'instructional cooperation'. Through the experience of CFC, the future teacher experiences how fruitful it is to develop and reflect on all elements of the teaching process together with another professional. In the long run, CFC leads to collegial classroom coaching or, in other words, to an exchange and support amongst peers in schools. This collegial classroom coaching encourages teachers to create effective learning environments by reflecting on and developing their repertoire. You as a visitor play a crucial role in this process for your young colleagues.

For further reading:

- Becker, E. S., Waldis, M., & Staub, F. C. (2019). Advancing visited teacher teachers' learning in the teaching practicum through Content-Focused Coaching: A field experiment. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 83, 12–26. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2019.03.007
- Kreis, A. (2019). Content-Focused Peer Coaching – facilitating visited teacher learning in a collaborative way. In T. Janík, I. M. Dalehefte, & S. Zehetmeier (Eds.), *Supporting teachers: improving instruction. Examples of research-based in-service teacher education* (pp. 37–55). Münster: Waxmann Publishing House.

Content-focused coaching: step by step

Step 1 Before the coaching session

Before the start of a session, the visitor and the teacher address organisational matters:

- ▶ When and where will the coaching take place?
- ▶ When will the lessons, briefing and debriefing take place?
- ▶ How much time is available for the meetings?

Step 2 Preliminary discussion

The teacher (as the coached) and visitor (as coach) select core perspectives and guiding questions as the focus for this coaching session. The following two guiding questions should always be included:

- ▶ What should the pupils learn (learning goals and subject content)?
- ▶ Is the lesson focused on the learner (lesson design)?

The teacher presents their ideas and relevant teaching materials.

The visitor and the teacher prepare the final lesson-plan together in a real dialogue.

They agree on whether or not the lesson should be co-taught.

Step 3 If agreed: jointly responsible teaching and observation

For the visitor, it is important to remember that, during a lesson, the teacher and the pupils are simultaneously involved in the learning process.

- ▶ The visitor teaches selected teaching sequences as a model.
- ▶ The teacher and the visitor teach together.
- ▶ The visitor participates spontaneously in the lessons, for example in a round of presentations and discussions of the pupils' solutions.
- ▶ The coached teacher teaches alone; the visitor observes and takes notes.

In all cases, the visitor observes and takes notes to prepare the debriefing. The focal points of observation are, as mentioned, agreed upon in advance.

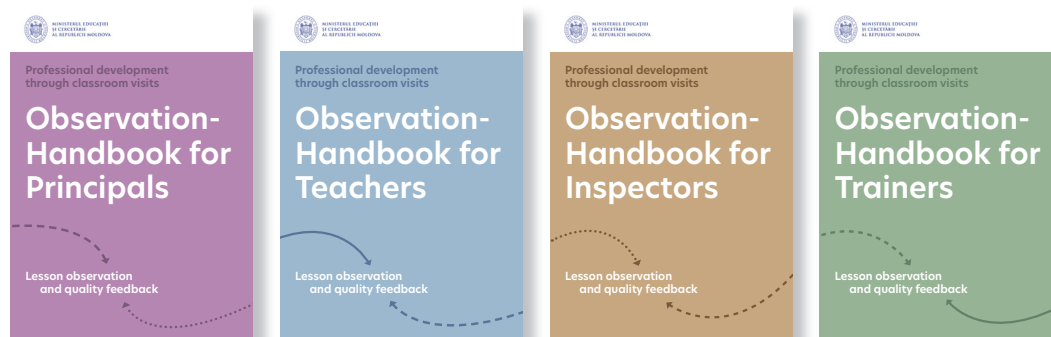
Step 4 Debriefing

- 1) The teacher reports on how they felt the lesson went in relation to the selected key questions, whether there were significant deviations from the plan and whether there were challenging or unsatisfactory situations.
- 2) The visitor adds to this from their own perspective, also with regard to the selected observation elements from the preliminary discussion.
- 3) The debriefing should also take place as a dialogue and co-constructive conversation, rather than as two consecutive monologues.

Professional development through classroom observation and evidence-based feedback.

Currently, evidence-based feedback is considered one of the most effective interventions for promoting learning and development processes in many professions, especially in the case of young and experienced teachers. It is seen as providing education professionals with the best possible individual support according to their potential. Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Research of Moldova in cooperation with the Zurich University of Teacher Education provides all education professionals with a set of materials to establish a common background, and the professional and jointly developed tools for quality observation and feedback.

The **Good Teaching and Learning** manual provides an insight into important aspects of quality teaching and learning. It serves as a foundation for peer teachers, principals, trainers and inspectors and provides hints for quality lessons and background for feedback after careful observation. This manual is also available with a special chapter on the subject of personal development.



The **Observation handbooks** for different audiences provide clear hints and materials for observation and feedback, and are written to make them applicable to two teachers or a teacher and someone from the education administration, from an inspectorate, from the school management, or from a training seminar. Lesson observation and feedback are not in any way control and judgment, but professional development for both the visitor and the teacher being observed. It is of central importance that each visit is followed up by subsequent feedback, which remains non-judgemental and is carried out according to principles and guidelines that have been mutually agreed upon beforehand.

It is hoped that the widespread use of these materials will help classroom visits to be experienced as a positive element of personal development and mutual exchange.