

# How to Conduct Better Observations: A Practical Guide for Education Professionals

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April 5, 2024



Mountain Plains (HHS Region 8)

**MHTTC**

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network  
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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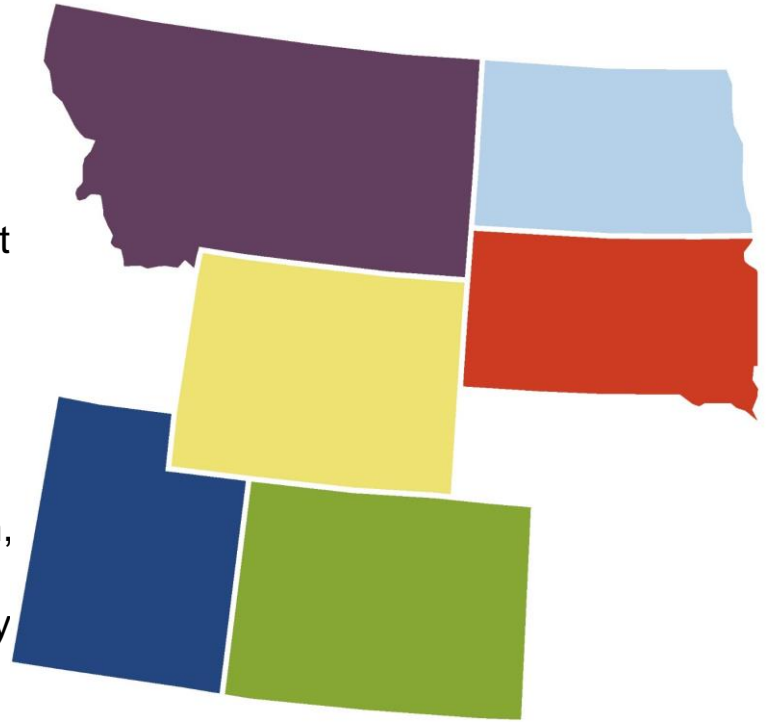
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# The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Mountain Plains MHTTC) provides training and technical assistance to individuals who serve persons with mental health concerns throughout Region 8 (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming).

We belong to the Technology Transfer Center (TTC) Network, a national network of training and technical assistance centers serving the needs of mental health, substance use and prevention providers. The work of the TTC Network is under a cooperative agreement by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA).



# Land Acknowledgement Statement

Today, the University of North Dakota rests on the ancestral lands of the Pembina and Red Lake Bands of Ojibwe and the Dakota Oyate - presently existing as composite parts of the Red Lake, Turtle Mountain, White Earth Bands, and the Dakota Tribes of Minnesota and North Dakota. We acknowledge the people who resided here for generations and recognize that the spirit of the Ojibwe and Oyate people permeates this land. As a university community, we will continue to build upon our relations with the First Nations of the State of North Dakota - the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation, Spirit Lake Nation, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.



The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

STRENGTHS-BASED  
AND HOPEFUL

INCLUSIVE AND  
ACCEPTING OF  
DIVERSE CULTURES,  
GENDERS,  
PERSPECTIVES,  
AND EXPERIENCES

HEALING-CENTERED AND  
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS  
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR  
OWN JOURNEYS

PERSON-FIRST AND  
FREE OF LABELS

NON-JUDGMENTAL AND  
AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

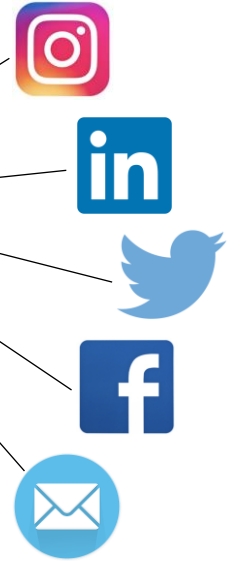
RESPECTFUL, CLEAR  
AND UNDERSTANDABLE

CONSISTENT WITH  
OUR ACTIONS,  
POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

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# How to Conduct Better Observations: A Practical Guide for Education Professionals

Dr. Alyson Kaneshiro  
Learning Specialist LLC

# Welcome – Who's in the Room?





## **Consult**

Students  
Families  
Teachers  
Support Teams

## **Recommend**

Resources  
Strategies  
Evaluation

# **Learning Specialists**

## **Observe**

Teaching  
Learning  
Classroom &  
beyond

## **Assess**

Screenings  
Surveys  
Progress  
monitoring

## **Advocate**

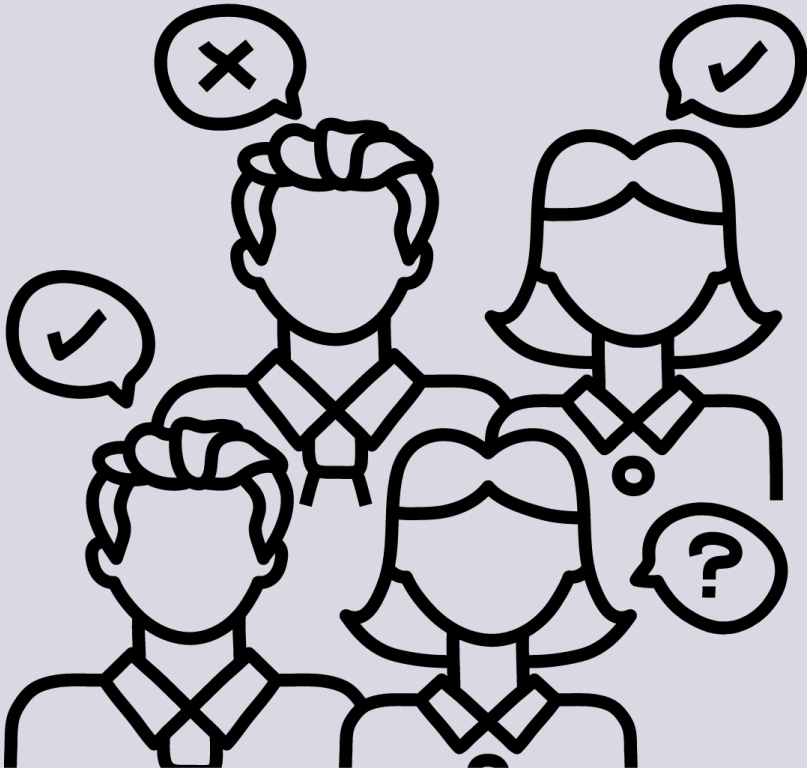
Accommodations  
"Level playing  
field"  
Against ableism



*The “why” behind the process & practice*

Expanding our learning and sharing our lived experiences of race, gender, class, oppression, power, and privilege enables us to become more connected and helps us to create actionable strategies that will better serve our students and our communities.

# Welcome



## Purpose of workshop

Equip participants with tools and resources to conduct better observations.

We will practice objective description, explore ways to challenge assumptions, and discover practical ways to avoid deficit perspectives in our observation practices.

# Agenda

1. Welcome (5 mins)
2. Framing our workshop (5 mins)
3. Deficit Dangers (15 mins)
4. “Anti-deficit” Observation Practices (20 mins)
5. Observation Protocol (25 mins)
6. Reflection and Application (10 mins)
7. Conclusion and Q&A (5 mins)
8. Thank You! (5 mins)



# Understanding assumptions in education

Definition: Assumptions are beliefs or ideas that are accepted as true or certain to happen without requiring proof.

Examples:

- lack of participation = disinterest, no motivation to learn
- quiet demeanor = shyness, lack of language ability
- repeated absences = family doesn't value school

# Understanding bias in education

Definition: Bias refers to an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, often unfairly impacting decisions or actions.

Examples:

- More attention paid to affluent “loudest voice” people vs. needs of lower income people
- Favoring students who conform to certain school norms in disciplinary actions vs. penalizing those who do not conform to norms such as gender expression, conversational patterns, play behaviors, etc.

# Similarities between bias and assumptions

1. Often operates unconsciously
2. Influence how we perceive and interpret information
3. Bias and assumptions play a significant role in decision-making.

*\*Educators may base decisions on biased perceptions or unsupported assumptions, leading to inequitable outcomes (e.g. student interventions, placements, disciplinary actions) perpetuating systemic inequalities in education.*

# So, are they bad?

1. They are not inherently bad/negative
2. They can be adaptive
  - conditions = legitimate evidence, enable efficient decision making
3. Potential Maladaptive Effects
  - unchecked assumptions and bias → behaviors & decisions → faulty/harmful actions & decision → perpetuating systemic inequality & injustice



# Assume that I can...



*\*Profanity warning @  
1 minute mark*

# Deficit Perspective

A deficit perspective situates school failure within the students (or their home culture).

Is an unexamined prejudice often directed at students from marginalized identity groups (e.g. students of color or from certain socio-economic statuses).

# 5 Common Categories

1. **Academic:** challenges in specific subject areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, or science.
2. **Behavioral:** classroom conduct, attention, focus, or social skills.
3. **Emotional:** emotional regulation, self-esteem, or coping mechanisms.
4. **Language:** language development, including vocabulary, grammar, or comprehension through conversation.
5. **Socioeconomic:** include access to resources, financial support systems, or environmental factors that impact learning opportunities.

# Deficit Perspective

1. **Academic:** "It's concerning that she is still struggling with basic multiplication. Her parents must not be providing enough support at home for her to grasp these concepts."
2. **Behavioral:** "He is constantly disrupting the class with his outbursts. It's clear that his parents aren't disciplining him properly at home, allowing him to behave however he wants."
3. **Emotional:** "Her constant tearfulness in class is becoming disruptive. She needs to toughen up emotionally; perhaps her family coddles her too much."
4. **Language:** "Their English skills are far behind his peers. It's likely because his family primarily speaks Spanish at home and doesn't prioritize English language development."
5. **Socioeconomic:** "She often comes to school hungry and tired. It's clear her family isn't providing her with the necessary resources for academic success."

# Pause to Process

- Have you ever read or heard an observation of student behavior that was framed in a deficit perspective?
- What types of deficit perspectives do you encounter? Are they similar or different from what was already shared?

# Anti-Deficit Perspective

## Excerpt from 10 Commitments of Equity Literate Educators

I will refuse to identify the source of social problems by looking down rather than up power hierarchies.

I reject the notion that people are marginalized due to their own “deficiencies.”

I understand that educational outcome disparities have nothing to do with the grittiness, mindsets, or cultures of marginalized students.

I commit to fixing injustice, not students.

– *Paul Gorski, Equity Literacy Institute*

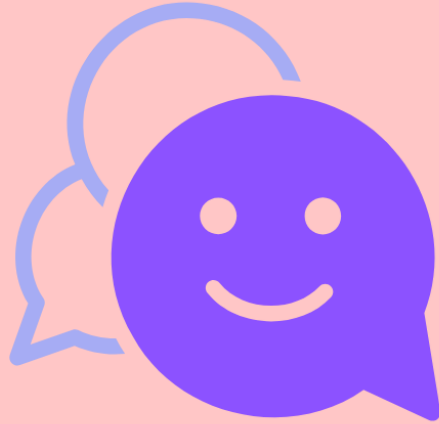
# Anti-Deficit Perspective

“This is not a call to abandon all efforts to help students develop those positive tenets of grit and growth mindset programs, such as self-discipline, voice, responsibility for one's choices, personal tenacity, initiative, authenticity, and self-efficacy...

Instead, this is a call to recognize that we are very different people depending on our circumstances, and that those circumstances, some of which are not actually in our control, yet are renewed each year by unintentional and intentional bias in those with power and influence, significantly affect our capacity to act upon the advice and teaching provided.”

- *Rick Wormeli, “Grit and Growth Mindset Deficit”*

**NO BLAME**



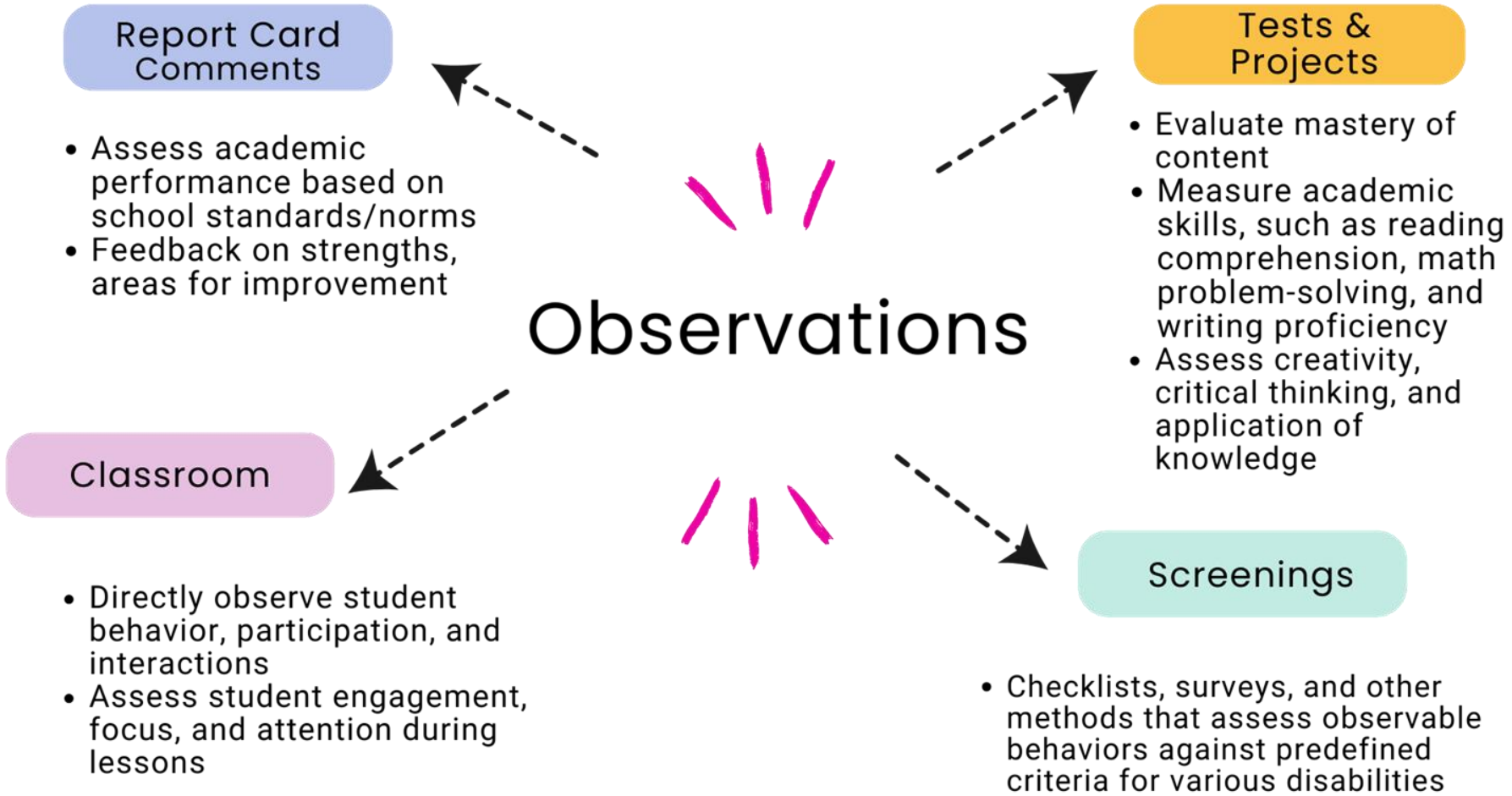
**NO SHAME**







# Observation Practices



# Observation of student learning

**Informal** = formative assessment, teacher collaboration  
(informal sharing between colleagues)



**Formal** = written observation as part of a learning evaluation, in a report card, progress report, admissions letter, or other evaluation of student learning.

Raise hand or drop “me” in the chat if **you** conducted a student observation (formal or informal) in the past 6 months



## Anti-Deficit Lens

- Bring tacit assumptions and attitudes to the surface
- Explore through reflective prompts
- Engage in collaborative inquiry
- Discuss differences free of defensiveness



# Four Anti-Deficit Practices

1. Pre-flect (readiness)
2. Measure what matters (systems)
3. Focus on strengths (student-centered)
4. Get clear (describe vs. interpret vs. evaluate)

# Practice – Pre-flect

- Am I ready to reflect on my attributions (explanations of other people's behaviors)?
- Am I prepared for the emotional risk of considering my implicit biases (or unexamined prejudices)? How will I navigate feelings of vulnerability if they emerge?
- Am I committed to unearthing any beliefs, behaviors, or communication patterns that might be perpetuating ~isms (ableism, racism, classism, etc.), unfair power and/or privilege structures? Why?
- Is there a critical friend I can debrief with to get feedback?

# Practice – Measure what Matters

1. Establish structures such as student success teams, inquiry teams, student voice committees, care teams, etc. that encourage collaborative inquiry
  
1. Engage teachers in the systematic use of disaggregated data – including quantitative and qualitative data on student experience, learning, and well being – to improve teaching and learning, by:
  - encouraging reflection
  - enhancing equitable opportunities

# Practice – Focus on Strengths

*Strength based observation:*

- Proactively search for strengths
- Curiosity is the most important trait to embody
- Open up to every possible strength



# Practice – Focus on Strengths

*Pay attention to:*

- Creativity in approaching a task
- Inspiring or motivating others
- Leveraging resources or social capital to benefit others
- Energy levels (more or less given different tasks)

*Remember to always try to have the student offer reflections on how they view their strengths and see how well it matches up with your observations.*

# Practice - Get Clear

Description	Objective detailing of observable behaviors, such as direct quotes, actions, and interactions, without adding personal interpretation or evaluation.
Interpretation	Inferring meaning behind the behavior, making assumptions about the intent or motive that influenced the observed actions.
Evaluation	Attributing a positive or negative significance to the behavior, assigning value or judgment to the observed actions based on personal beliefs or cultural influences.

# Observation Scenario

During a 25 minute history lecture on the American Revolution, Sandy, a seventh-grade student, raised her hand five times to ask questions or contribute to the discussion. The classroom seating arrangement consisted of rows of desks facing the front, with Sandy seated towards the middle of the room next to a peer. The teacher had instructed students to participate actively in the class discussion by raising their hands to ask questions or share insights. Sandy's questions pertained to key events and figures of the American Revolution.

Additionally, Sandy engaged in conversation with her seatmate twice during the lecture. The teacher did not prompt students to engage in pair discussions; however, Sandy seemed to initiate the conversations herself. Sandy and her seatmate discussed historical figures and events mentioned by the teacher.

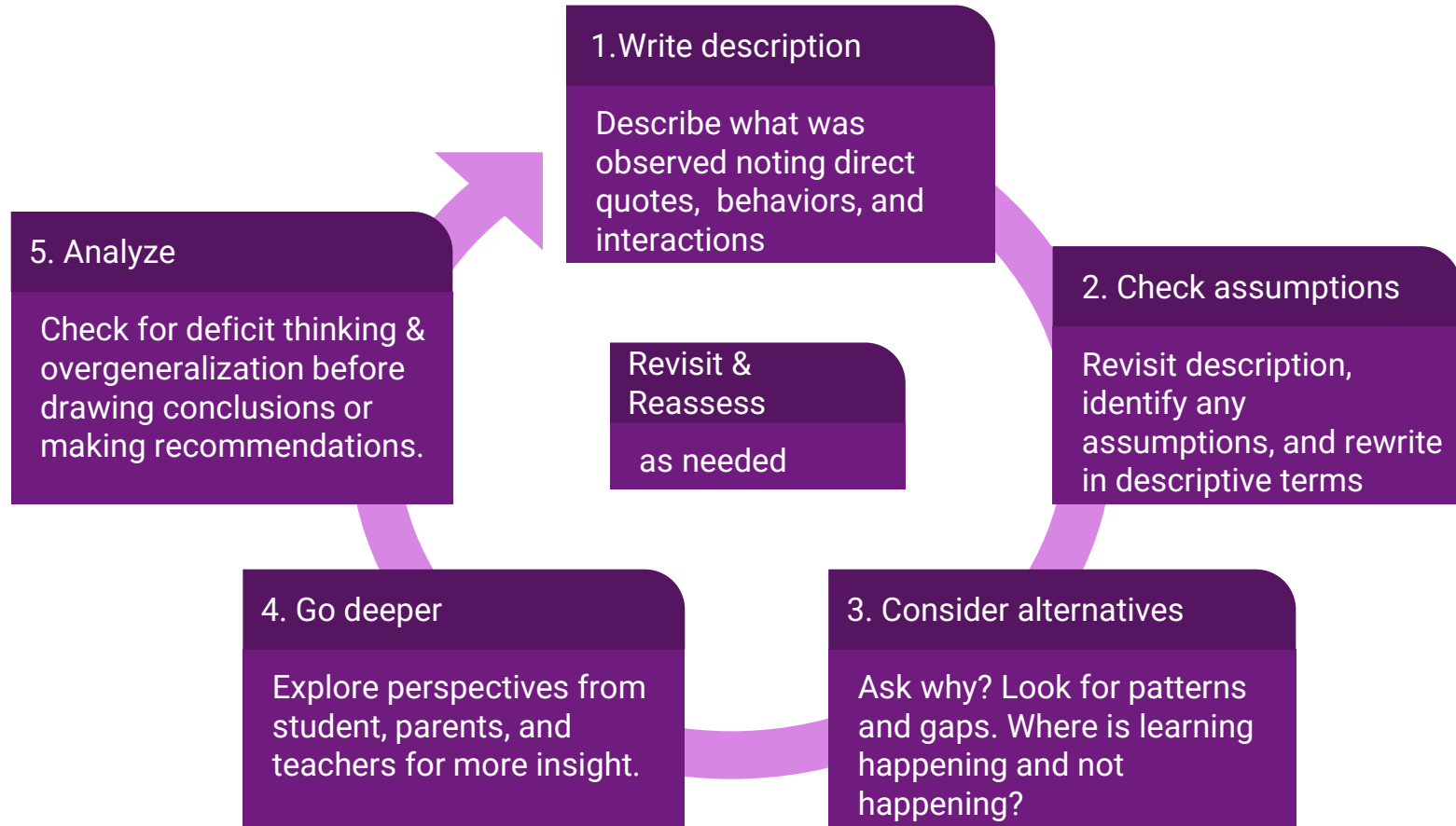
# Practice - Get Clear

Description	Objective detailing of observable behaviors, such as direct quotes, actions, and interactions, without adding personal interpretation or evaluation.	<i>“Sandy raised her hand five times during the lecture and talked with her seatmate two times.”</i>
Interpretation	Inferring meaning behind the behavior, making assumptions about the intent or motive that influenced the observed actions.	<i>“Sandy really thrives on teacher attention” or “Sandy is really interested in this topic”</i>
Evaluation	Attributing a positive or negative significance to the behavior, assigning value or judgment to the observed actions based on personal beliefs or cultural influences.	<i>“Sandy can be distracted and disruptive during lectures” or “Sandy’s initiative makes her a positive contributor to the classroom.”</i>

# Pause to Process

- Have you ever read or heard an observation of student behavior that didn't offer evidence to support the inference (motive) or evaluation (significance) provided by the observer?
- How might applying the "Get Clear" framework in your practice prevent and/or address potential observation issues (lack of evidence, unchecked assumptions)?

# Observation Protocol



# Observation Protocol

## 1. *Description (Objective detailing of observable behaviors):*

- What did you see or hear during the observation? Use direct quotes, actions, and interactions.

What I saw	What was said	Notes (context)

# Observation Protocol

## 2. *Check Assumptions (Evaluation, Interpretations):*

- Revisit your description. What assumptions did you make? Highlight or underline words/phrases that indicate assumptions.
- Have you evaluated, interpreted, or described the behavior? If so, rewrite what you observed in descriptive terms only (remove assumptions).



# Observation Protocol

## 3. *Alternative Explanations (Consider external factors):*

- Review the descriptions and reflect on potential reasons for the observed behaviors.
- What are the expectations for the situation, and how is the student meeting/not meeting them?
- List alternative explanations or interpretations of the student's behavior.
- What external factors or personal factors could be influencing the student's behavior?

# Observation Protocol

## 4. *Going Deeper (Explore circumstances and additional perspectives):*

- What recent changes have occurred in the student's life, disability status, acculturation, etc.?
- Meet/talk with parents to understand expected and observed behaviors in the home.
- Consult with the classroom teacher to gain insights into expected and observed behaviors in the class.
- If appropriate, meet/talk with the student to understand their learning experience.

# Observation Protocol

## 5. *Analysis (Identify overgeneralization or deficit perspective):*

- Look for evidence of overgeneralization or attributed behavior within a deficit perspective (assigning blame or negative attributes to the student).

# Observation Protocol

## 6. *Reflection:*

- Reflect on your observations and the alternative explanations you considered.
- How did your initial assumptions impact your interpretation of the student's behavior?

# Observation Protocol

## *7. Reassess and Plan:*

- Revisit the steps periodically to reassess your attributions and progress with the student.
- Plan any necessary adjustments to your approach working with this student based on your insights.

# Closing Reflection

- How can you use some of the tools presented here to systematically collect and use student learning data to improve teaching and learning?
- How can you leverage (or innovate) existing structures to create space for anti-deficit observations and practices?

# 3, 2, 1 Feedback

- 3 useful takeaways from the workshop (interesting, practical, affirming, etc)
- 2 things you want to learn more about or are still pondering
- 1 question, suggestion, or comment

Thank you!



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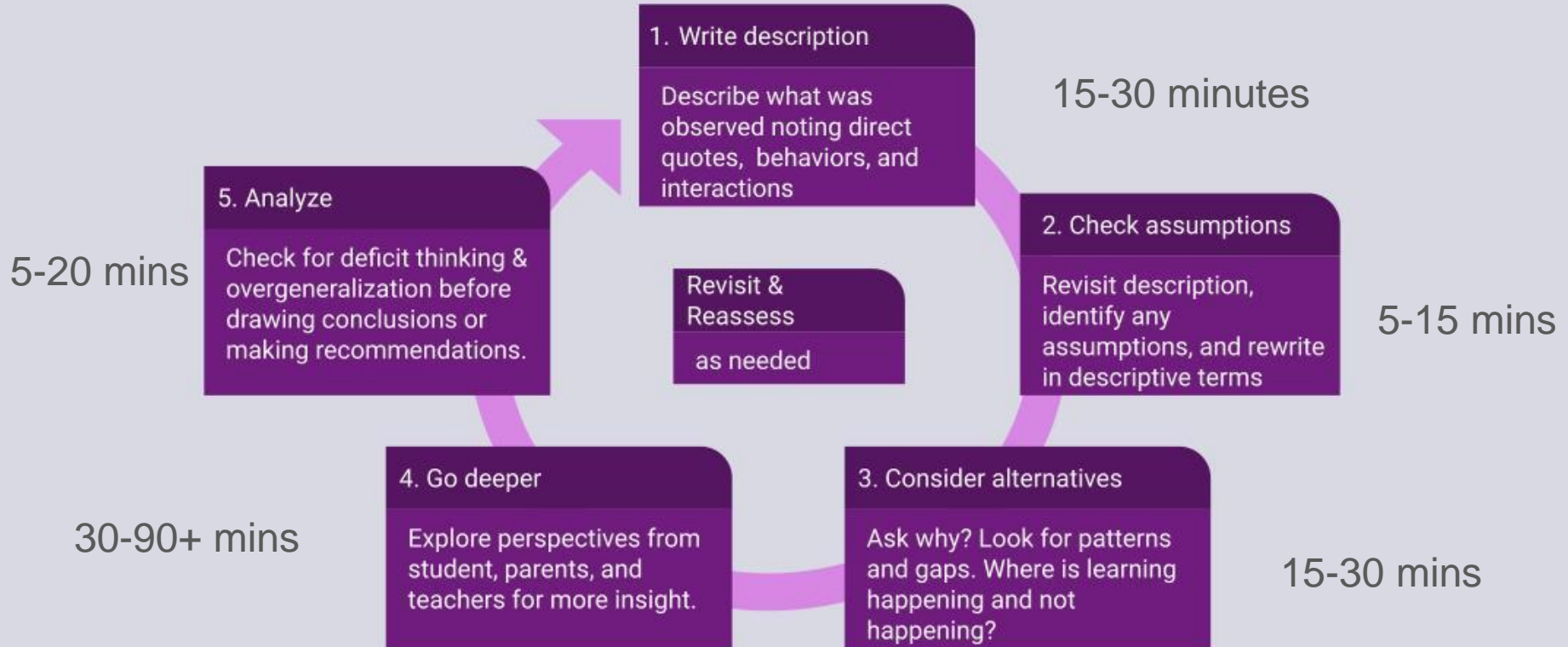
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# Resist Equity Detours



# Observation Protocol



# Two Critical Skills

1. Reflection - slowing down and becoming aware (of mental models, biases, & assumptions, etc)
1. Inquiry - openly sharing and examine assumptions with curiosity



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