

What Should classroom OBSERVATION Measure

This booklet describes scientific evidence regarding several key areas of teachers' practice that observational measures should assess.



Part 2

of a 5 Part Series:

**A Practitioner's Guide to
Conducting Classroom
Observations:** What
the Research Tells Us
About Choosing and Using
Observational Systems to
Assess and Improve Teacher
Effectiveness



What Types of Teaching Practices Should Observational Tools Assess?

There is now strong empirical evidence regarding a variety of teaching practices that can, and should, be the focus of classroom observations intended to measure and enhance teacher performance. A key ingredient of any classroom or school environment, with regard to learning and development, is the nature and quality of interaction between adults and students. Although other factors, such as curriculum, teacher planning, and parent involvement, are important – it is students' daily experiences in the classroom, with teachers and peers, that have the greatest influence on how much they are able to learn.

There are three broad domains of teaching practice that are linked to positive student outcomes: social/emotional support, organization/management support, and instructional support. Mounting empirical evidence suggests that attending to each of these domains of teaching helps to fully understand the impact of classroom experiences on student performance. The descriptions provided below are derived in large part from one particular observational tool, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), but they reflect the types of teacher behaviors and practices measured in many classroom observation systems. Importantly, empirical evidence suggests that when teachers use these types of practices, students learn more.

Key Concept – Content of Observations

Be intentional about your choice of content of observations. One possible conceptualization directs observers to focus on the nature and quality of teacher practices within three broad areas: Social/Emotional Support, Management/Organizational Support, and Instructional Support.

Social and Emotional Supports: As a behavioral setting, classrooms run on interactions between and among participants. It is not an overstatement to suggest that most children and adolescents live for their social relationships. Students who are more motivated and connected to teachers and peers demonstrate positive trajectories of development in both social and academic domains. The types of teaching practices that may be observed under this domain include:

- *Classroom Climate* – In classrooms with a positive climate, teachers and students are enthusiastic about learning and respectful of one another. Teachers and students have positive relationships with each other and clearly enjoy being together and spending time in the classroom.
- *Teacher Sensitivity* – Teachers are sensitive when they consistently respond to students and are effective in addressing students' questions, concerns, and needs. Teaching sensitively includes having an awareness of individual students' academic and emotional abilities in a way that allows teachers to anticipate areas of difficulty and provide appropriate levels of support for all students in the classroom.
- *Regard for Student Perspectives* – Teachers who value student perspectives provide opportunities for students to make decisions and assume leadership roles. They make content useful and relevant to students, make sure that student ideas and opinions are valued, and encourage meaningful interactions with peers and opportunities for action.

Organizational and Management Supports: In the education literature focused on teaching and teacher training, perhaps no other aspect of classroom practice receives as much attention as classroom management and organization. Management of time and of students' attention and behavior is an area of great concern to new and experienced teachers; teachers often request that observations and feedback focus on this aspect of their practice. Classroom organization and management is an indicator of teacher competence in that well-organized and managed classrooms facilitate the development of students' self-regulatory skills. These skills are a necessary component of building academic competence – students must learn how to regulate their own attention and behavior in order to get the most out of instruction and activities. The types of teaching practices that contribute to effective management/organization include:

- *Behavior Management* – Students are most likely to behave appropriately in the classroom when rules and expectations are clearly and consistently communicated. Behavior management works best when focused on proactive intervention and efficient, positive redirection of minor misbehaviors. High-quality behavior management provides students with specific expectations for their behavior and repeated reinforcement for meeting these expectations.
- *Productivity* – Productive classrooms provide clearly defined learning activities for students throughout the day. The classroom looks like a “well-oiled machine” where everyone knows what is expected and how to go about



doing it. Little to no instructional time is lost due to unclear expectations for students, lack of materials, time spent waiting around, or unnecessarily lengthy managerial tasks (e.g., inefficient checking of work, extended directions for a group project that take more time than the project itself).

- *Strategies for Engaging Students* – In effective classrooms teachers provide instruction using many modalities (e.g. visual, oral, movement), look for opportunities to engage students in active participation, and effectively facilitate student learning during group lessons, seat work, and one-on-one time with well timed questions and comments that expand students' involvement. Effective teachers also use strategies such as providing advanced organizers and summations to help students recognize and focus on the main point of lessons and activities.

Instructional Supports: Instructional methods have been put in the spotlight in recent years as more emphasis has been placed on the translation of cognitive science, learning, and developmental research to educational environments. It may be important to differentiate between *general* and *content-specific* instructional supports. General instructional supports are those that are relevant and observable across content areas. Content-specific instructional supports, in contrast, describe strategies for teaching students particular skills and knowledge such as reading, math, or science. For the purpose of brevity we will focus here on generalized instructional supports. The types of teaching practices that may be observed under this domain include:

- *Strategies that Foster Content Knowledge* – Effective teachers use approaches to help students comprehend the overarching framework and key ideas in an academic discipline. At a high level, this refers to an integrated understanding of facts, concepts, and principles rather than memorizing basic facts or definitions in isolation.
- *Strategies that Foster Analysis and Reasoning Skills* – Effective instructional approaches engage students in higher order thinking skills, such as reasoning, integration, experimentation (e.g., hypothesis generation and testing), and metacognition (i.e., thinking about one's own thinking). When teachers effectively foster reasoning skills, the cognitive demands of these activities rest primarily with the students, as opposed to situations when the teacher presents information, draws conclusions, etc. At the highest level, students are expected to independently solve or reason through novel and open-ended tasks requiring them to integrate and apply existing knowledge and skills.
- *Strategies that Foster Knowledge of Procedures and Skills* – When teaching procedures (such as mathematical algorithms, steps in the writing process or in doing historiography, decision trees for diagnosing a medical condition, or the steps utilized in the scientific method), effective teachers clearly identify the steps of the procedure or skill, the context in which to use it, and the rationale for using it in terms of students' perspectives. They consistently present procedures and skills by anchoring them to and building on students' existing knowledge. They also provide multiple, varied, correct, age-appropriate examples to illustrate or demonstrate the use of a procedure or skill, as well as potential alternative approaches. Finally, effective teachers regularly and effectively incorporate opportunities for supervised practice prior to independent practice of new procedures and skills.
- *Quality of Feedback* – Students learn the most when they are consistently given feedback on their performance. Feedback works best when it is focused on the process of learning, rather than simply on getting the right answer. High-quality feedback provides students with specific information about their work and helps them reach a deeper understanding of concepts than they could get on their own. Teachers delivering high-quality feedback don't simply stop with a "good job." They engage in ongoing, back-and-forth exchanges with students on a regular basis.
- *Instructional Dialogue* – Effective teachers intentionally provide support for the development of increasingly complex verbal communication skills. Teachers facilitate language development when they encourage, respond to, and expand on student talk. High-quality instructional dialogues also include purposefully engaging students in meaningful conversations with teachers and peers. Teachers using high-quality language modeling strategies repeat students' words in more complex forms, map actions with language, and ask follow-up questions. Students are consistently exposed to a variety of language uses and forms and are explicitly introduced to new vocabulary.

Effective Classroom Interactions and Teacher Practices in U.S. Classrooms

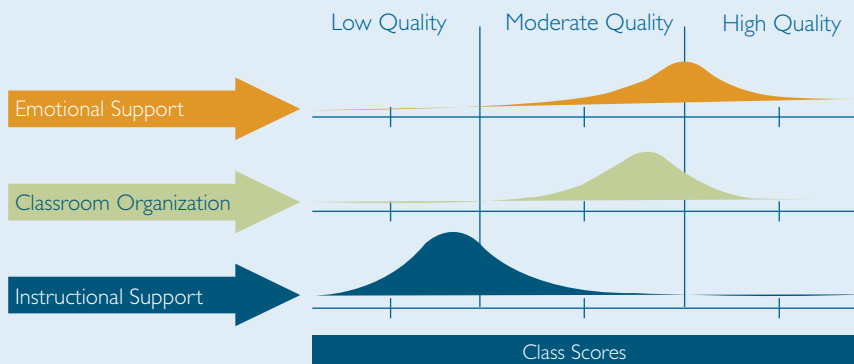
There is now compelling evidence that teachers who use these types of practices in their classrooms have students who make greater academic and social progress. Unfortunately, the odds are stacked against students actually getting the classroom supports necessary for their success.

- Research suggests that on average, students are exposed to moderate levels of social and organizational supports in their elementary classrooms but quite low levels of instructional supports (see Figure 2) – levels not as high as those found in first grade classrooms that close the achievement gap between at-risk and non-risk students

- In nearly every study that includes a large number of classrooms, an exceptional degree of variability in the qualities of classroom experience and interactions to which children are exposed is found, particularly in the areas that our study shows matter most for children.
- A typical school day for some students includes spending most of their time engaged in productive instructional activities with caring and responsive adults who consistently provide feedback and challenge students to think critically. Yet for others, even in the same grade and same school, a typical day consists of spending most of the time sitting around, watching the teacher deal with behavioral problems, and engaging in boring, rote instructional activities such as completing worksheets and taking spelling tests.

Figure 2: Classroom Observations Help Link Improvement Resources to Positive Outcomes for Teachers and Students

Average Ratings of Interactions in Pre-K - 3rd Classrooms



The University of Virginia Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) focuses on the quality of teaching and students' learning. CASTL's aim is to improve educational outcomes through the empirical study of teaching, teacher quality, and classroom experience from preschool through high school, with particular emphasis on the challenges posed by poverty, social or cultural isolation, or lack of community resources.