Why Should We Use
classroom
OBSERVATION

This booklet presents a model for understanding how observing teachers' behaviors plays an important role in systematically improving the use of effective classroom practices.

Part 1
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

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Observations Help Link Quality Improvement Resources to Positive Outcomes for Teachers and Students

In order to understand why and how standardized, valid classroom observations can improve student outcomes, it is helpful to see how these observations are embedded within an overarching framework for understanding how learning and development take place, both for teachers and for students.

We see three key aspects of the teaching-learning system, represented in Figure 1: 1) inputs/resources, 2) teachers' interactive competencies, and 3) outcomes, such as student learning. Inputs are those resources that support teachers' acquisition of a set of behavioral competencies that then translate into improved learning outcomes for students.

Adult learning and professional development literatures point to four key areas which may impact teachers' use of effective teaching practices.

1. **Teacher Education:** Providing teachers with education around overarching principles and specific practices for interacting with students. These principles and practices need to be based on educational and developmental theory and research and be delivered in ways that promote teachers' intentional use of these practices.

2. **Professional Development:** Providing professional development that is individualized, classroom practice
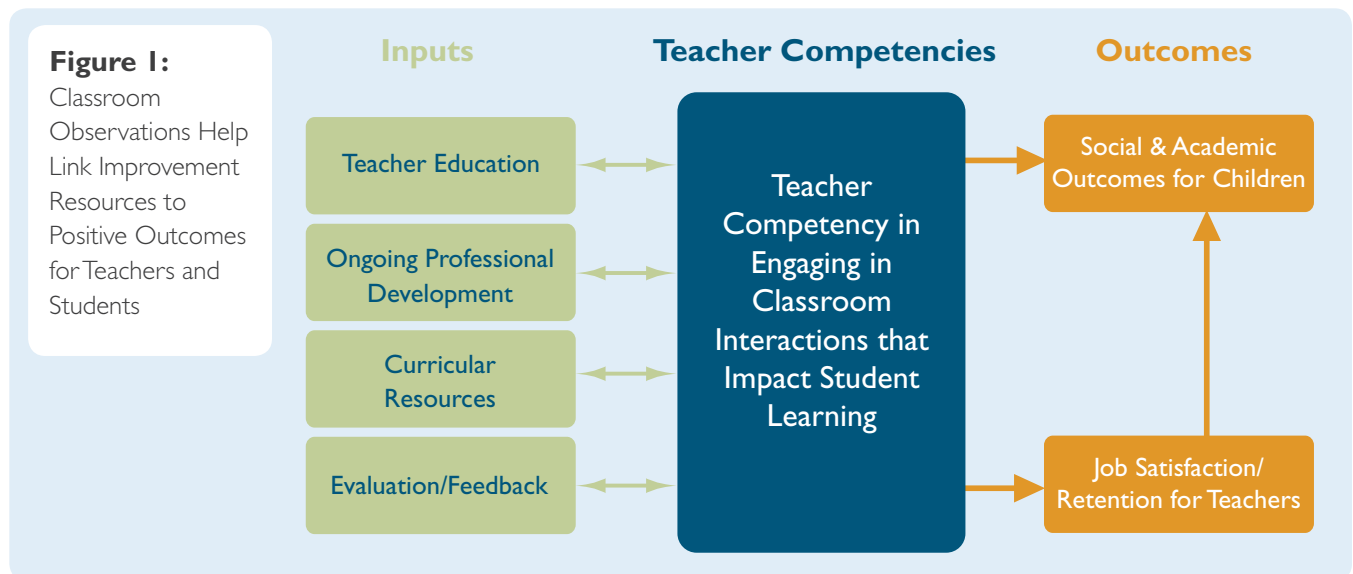
based, and ongoing is critical to changing teaching practices.

3. **Curricular Resources:** Providing teachers with curricular resources and materials that facilitate effective classroom interactions can help promote uptake of these practices.

4. **Evaluation and Feedback:** Finding ways to embed observations of effective teaching practices into existing systems for evaluation and feedback can help motivate teacher change.

The skills that teachers develop as a result of these inputs, if utilized consistently in interactions with students, lead to optimal student learning and development. Figure 1, below, illustrates these connections between resources designed to support teachers, teachers' behavioral skills, and teacher and student outcomes.

This visual model provides an overarching framework, highlighting the idea that resources for teachers (e.g., education, professional development opportunities, curricular resources, and evaluation/feedback) are linked to desired outcomes (e.g., teacher job satisfaction and retention; student social and academic development) via teacher interactions in classrooms.

Figure 1:
Classroom Observations Help Link Improvement Resources to Positive Outcomes for Teachers and Students

Inputs
- Teacher Education
- Ongoing Professional Development
- Curricular Resources
- Evaluation/Feedback

Teacher Competencies
- Teacher Competency in Engaging in Classroom Interactions that Impact Student Learning

Outcomes
- Social & Academic Outcomes for Children
- Job Satisfaction/ Retention for Teachers

Embracing the logic of this framework, educational leaders need to take an active role in defining, assessing, and supporting those classroom interactions and teacher practices that impact desired outcomes. Observation is an essential piece of this work of aligning inputs and student and teacher outcomes.

The Need for Standardized, Validated Observational Tools

This is not a new idea. Every principal spends time observing teachers, and most teacher education programs have some way of providing students with feedback on their practicum experiences in classrooms.

However, the vast majority of these observations rely on unstandardized, informal, and unvalidated procedures. Each school district, principal, and mentor teacher derives a set of ideal teacher practices, some based on research and some which are simply a reflection of personal preference or broad educational theory.

These types of approaches are of significant concern because they typically:

1. lack formal training for conducting observations (which makes consistency across observers highly unlikely);

2. lack standardized criteria for determining adequate versus inadequate practices;

3. lack standards around the content of feedback provided.

We argue that without the more systematic use of standardized, reliable, and validated observational tools, the ultimate value of any observations and the feedback they provide to teachers is limited. Without a standardized, validated observational system in place, teachers are likely to receive very different types of feedback and support on the use of effective teaching practices throughout their training and work experiences.

More importantly, unless many teachers and observers are using the same "common denominator" for describing effective practice, then large numbers of teachers (e.g., professional groups, school districts) cannot improve progressively or systematically.

By using observational tools that are standardized and validated against student outcomes, educators, mentors, and admin-

Key Concept – Reliability and Validity
A tool that provides **reliable** observations helps ensure that anyone who is trained to use the tool will use it consistently and fairly across observations of different teachers and classrooms. A tool that is **validated** has established empirical evidence of associations between scores on the tool and outcomes of interest such as student achievement.

istrators can know that they are making comparisons on an even playing field when noting strengths and challenges across classrooms, and they can know that the behaviors they are observing and noting are directly related to student growth and development.

Use of standardized and valid tools in no way interferes with giving personalized feedback to teachers; rather, it allows for the provision of highly specific and individualized feedback with regard to clearly defined areas that are consistent across all teachers. Although some will argue that individual contexts require unique tools to match their student population, research suggests that the same set of effective teaching practices have fairly consistent effects across contexts.

The advantages of using standardized tools far outweigh the disadvantages related to the context-specific needs of any particular school or organization. This does not mean that every teacher in a program or district needs to be observed with the same tool, although several newer tools allow that possibility. Rather educational leaders need to make intentional decisions about the teaching competencies most aligned with the learning goals of their schools. Then they need to select measures that effectively and efficiently assess those competencies.

Promoting Effective Classroom Interactions and Teaching Practices

In order to enhance students' experiences in school, and thus their academic and social success, it is necessary to not just measure but also to improve these types of interactions between teachers and students.

There are at least three key factors that need to be in place in order for such improvements to occur:

1. Teachers, teacher educators, and school personnel must have a common vision and shared goals about how to make each classroom maximally successful.

2. There needs to be some reliable and valid mechanism in place to assess the standing of classrooms vis-à-vis these goals.

3. Teachers and other school personnel need access to professional development experiences that are effective in making progress towards these goals.

A well-defined classroom observation system can assist in addressing all three of these factors.

First, we know that in a typical school there are probably as many definitions of effective practice as there are professionals in the building. Without a shared vision of effective practice, communication between teachers and administrators and among teachers is likely to be unproductive. A reliable and validated observational protocol provides school personnel with a shared definition of effective practice and a common method for looking for these practices in the classroom. Importantly, by using a reliable and validated tool (i.e., one that has shown capacity for consistent use across observers and across time, as well as a relation to desired student outcomes), teachers and administrators can have confidence that their shared definition of quality practice is leading them to focus on the types of classroom interactions that really make a difference for students.

With regard to the second factor, the explicit purpose of a classroom observation system is to assess the standing of classrooms in relation to types of classroom interactions deemed relevant for student success. Using reliable and valid tools to observe and rate classrooms provides a research-based mechanism for achieving this second step toward systematic increases in educational quality. Including direct assessments of teaching practices using reliable and valid metrics in addition to the commonly utilized assessment of more distal proxies for effective teaching (such as student standardized test scores) can be a valuable component of accountability efforts and provides data that can directly inform individualized and targeted programs of professional development, discussed below.

The third factor that facilitates improvement in teaching practice is access to professional development that offers ongoing training, support, and feedback. Identifying areas of strengths and challenges based on classroom observation scores can provide information about school-level instructional weaknesses which can be targeted for intensive in-service trainings. Furthermore, profiles of the strengths and areas of challenge for individual teachers provide a useful starting point for individualized professional development plans that target improvements in specific areas of teaching practice through the provision of support and constructive challenge.

Key Concept –
Observations and Feedback for Teachers
In addition to helping define clear goals and creating a shared purpose, classroom observations can provide an objective method for measuring progress towards these goals and provide a framework for giving constructive and focused feedback that helps teachers incorporate higher levels of desired behaviors into their interactions with students in the classroom.