



HARVARD EDUCATION LETTER

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conversation with Robert Pianta

Neither Art nor Accident

New research helps define and develop quality preK and elementary teaching

Study after study shows that quality teaching is the most powerful factor in student learning. But how do you define quality teaching in a way that can be measured and taught? Dr. Robert Pianta, director of the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning and the National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education, developed the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to measure quality instruction in the preK–5 classroom. Nearly 1,000 observers from schools and districts in 23 states are now trained in administering CLASS, and about 600 teachers in 8 states are beginning to use MyTeachingPartner, an online professional development program based on CLASS. Pianta, who also serves as dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, spoke with Harvard Education Letter contributing writer Sue Miller Wiltz about how his research can help clarify and improve the quality of teaching in preK and elementary classrooms.



Why is measuring teacher quality important?

Right now the definition of good teaching is all over the map because people don't use the same language and lens. With CLASS, we have been able to look into 1,000 different classrooms using the same lens, and we can show that the classrooms we rated highly using this system were achieving more, whether they're in Arkansas or Massachusetts or Pennsylvania. I think this is enormously important for the field. Otherwise, we end up concluding that good teaching is just an art—or worse, that it's an accident. That's not a very good thing if you're worried about the quality of the education system and how to improve it systematically.

What are the critical factors in good teaching?

We have defined three broad domains of supportive interactions: emotional support, organizational support, and instructional support. Within each of these interactions we identified three or four key dimensions. For each of these dimensions there is a solid body of research linking their importance to student learning (see "10 Dimensions of Good Teaching," p. 7). Using CLASS, teachers are rated by observers on a scale of 1–7 for each dimension. Teachers who are rated highly for behavior management, for example, will put books out on tables so that students don't have to push each other to get to them, rather than just putting a pile in the middle of a rug for 20 children to come grab at once. They always appear to be one step ahead of problems in the classroom, anticipating and preventing misbehavior. Teachers who score high on positive emotional climate consistently demonstrate respect for their students. They are in proximity when they speak to the children in their classroom, establish eye contact before speaking to them, and address them by name. They consistently have a warm and calm tone and use language that communicates respect, such as saying "Please," "Thank you," and "You're welcome." The absence of harshness and tension is noticeable, and when conflicts arise they quickly dissipate. This type of environment is conducive to learning and allows children to feel safe to explore.

This seems different from the way "good instruction" is usually defined.

Too often when educators talk about quality of instruction, they think, "Was the teacher prepared to give a les-

son?" with a focus on basic skills—learning certain facts and recalling these on tests. However, we find that teachers' instructional behaviors and the way they provide emotional supports are *both* independent contributors to children's learning. I think one of the challenges that teachers have is trying to hang on to the emotional support side of their interactions with students while they have such pressure on the instructional side of things.

Everybody is feeling pressure to produce greater achievement and that extends down into preK. What we find over and over again is that when we show teachers the CLASS system, they say, "Oh, somebody is finally describing *all* the different things that I try to do with kids." What we are calling attention to are the behaviors teachers use to stimulate reasoning, problem-solving, and a depth of thinking about material. Instruction is defined in a way that makes sense and is appropriate developmentally.

Teachers at all levels find it helpful to see that the emotional climate of the classroom is an important part of learning. In preK that's been pretty well accepted for a long

time, but it's a harder argument to make as you go up the grades. I think the research we're doing is putting forth evidence that classrooms should be viewed as social and emotional settings as well as instructional settings.

What have you learned about the overall quality of student experiences from preK through the elementary grades?

The typical American preK-to-fifth-grade classroom offers moderate levels of emotional and organizational support and low levels of instructional support. It's a reasonably positive place socially and organizationally and kids are busy, but these classrooms are not very stimulating and kids are not really actively engaged. They are exposed to instruction in a much more passive way. There is a lot of sitting and listening and not a lot of thinking and doing.

We also see the absence of consistency from year to year. Kids may get a better or worse experience in any given year: One year students might be getting something very rich, and the next year they're back to something that is really boring. We know from other researchers' work that for students who struggle in school, having an effective teacher several years in a row is very important for stabilizing achievement gains for the longer term. Unfortunately, this kind of experience is not the norm for most children, whether they struggle or not. High-quality classroom experiences—which have been shown to help close achievement gaps—are rare. If we really want to see the kind of gains we need to see in AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress], then we need to put children in high-quality classrooms year in and year out so that those gains are present year after year after year. CLASS provides teachers and principals with a tool for describing and discussing what teachers do in classrooms that can be applied year to year so a student's experience can be consistent.

But doesn't effective teaching look different from grade to grade?

The three domains of teacher-child interaction in classrooms—emotional, organizational, and instructional support—stay the same. What changes are the behavioral indicators of their dimensions. For example, a fifth-grade teacher might show sensitivity toward students a little differently than a preK teacher might. When a preK teacher notices a child who is reticent to join an activity, she may walk over to that child and sit in very close proximity and talk in a very low and quiet voice, and then take the child's hand and lead him to the activity. A fifth-grade teacher noticing a child who is reticent to join an activity may identify the child's friend in the classroom and assign the friend to go work with the child for a moment, and

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Preschool Rating Systems

At least 25 states have taken steps to evaluate the quality of their preK programs, according to the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, which late last year recommended that states adopt one of four approaches for evaluating preK classrooms.

States that are already devising a wide range of systems for assessing the quality of early childhood programs include:

- **Texas.** A new voluntary certification system uses scores from the Texas Primary Reading Inventory, a test for kindergartners, as well as a social-skills test to rate the quality of preK programs. Results are posted online for parents to view.
- **New Jersey.** The education department uses The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale—Revised and two other state-developed tools to assess instructional practices in language and math in 300 classrooms chosen randomly from the state-supported Abbott districts. Results are used to plan professional development and other supports.
- **Virginia.** Governor Timothy M. Kaine has proposed an expansion in the number of four-year-olds eligible for free preschool in tandem with a new preschool rating system based on level of teacher training, class size, and expert observation, such as CLASS.

Source: "Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality." *The Report of The National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force*, October 2007. Available online at www.pewtrusts.org/news_room_ektid30964.aspx

10 Dimensions of Good Teaching

The CLASS approach provides a common metric and language for the discussion of quality across grades, thereby addressing problems with grade-to-grade transition and the need for coherence. There are 10 dimensions of interaction that reflect three broad domains of interactional supports—emotional support, organizational support, and instructional support.

The dimensions included under emotional support on CLASS are:

- *Positive Climate*: the enjoyment and emotional connection that teachers have with students, as well as the nature of peer interactions
- *Negative Climate*: the level of expressed negativity such as anger, hostility or aggression exhibited by teachers and/or students in the classroom
- *Teacher Sensitivity*: teachers' responsiveness to students' academic and emotional needs
- *Regard for Student Perspectives*: the degree to which teachers' interactions with students and classroom activities place an emphasis on students' interests, motivations, and points of view

The dimensions under organizational support are:

- *Behavior Management*: how well teachers monitor, prevent, and redirect behavior
- *Productivity*: how well the classroom runs with respect to routines, how well students understand the routine, and the degree to which teachers provide activities and directions so that maximum time can be spent in learning activities
- *Instructional Learning Formats*: how teachers engage students in activities and facilitate activities so that learning opportunities are maximized

The dimensions under instructional support are:

- *Concept Development*: how teachers use instructional discussions and activities to promote students' higher-order thinking skills and cognition in contrast to a focus on rote instruction
- *Quality of Feedback*: how teachers extend students' learning through their responses and participation in activities
- *Language Modeling*: the extent to which teachers facilitate and encourage students' language

then may come over and provide encouragement and positive feedback. So behaviors may change to correspond to developmental shifts while dimensions that include those behaviors do not.

How can teachers use what you've learned to improve their teaching?

Every day teachers have to make dozens of real-time decisions. They need to have guides in their heads about how they're going to facilitate children's learning in the next moments. Through our MyTeachingPartner (MTP) website and consulting program, we give teachers access to a lot of videotaped examples of successful interactions from either their own or others' classrooms. A teacher can go to the site and see very clearly what a teacher is doing that makes

her interactions with a student score highly on one of our dimensions, such as sensitivity. The second layer of support we offer is an online coaching system. The teachers watch video clips of themselves and they work with a consultant to apply signal reading and detection techniques to their own behavior. Teachers start to be able to look at children's signals and cues, to identify when their responses are effective and ways they might be improved.

What changes in teaching have you seen as a result of these online supports?

Teachers who got consultative support showed greater gains in the quality of their interactions than those who just used the Web, but teachers in the group that only went to the Web also improved. Consulting is especially important for teachers who teach in very high-poverty classrooms. Children in these classrooms tend to have more behavioral and emotional problems, and there are more demands on the teachers' moment-to-moment decisionmaking. Recently, we've been very interested in further tying CLASS and MTP to professional development and credentialing frameworks. We've drawn lessons from our work in Virginia with MyTeachingPartner to develop a college course. The course will focus on using CLASS to effectively stimulate language and literacy development.

But it's not only teachers who are getting trained on CLASS. State officials are using it in quality rating systems and as an indication of what defines a high-quality classroom (see "Preschool Rating Systems," p. 6). School districts are using

it in a similar manner. CLASS is fundamentally a standardized lens for looking at the interactions that teachers have with students in the classroom. The next step is to improve upon those interactions. ■

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For Further Information



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