

Semester III

Unit IV

Topic - Assessment Device,
Observation of Activities

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Observation of activities

with so much attention these days focused on the results of standardized tests, it can be easy to forget one very important fact, stated Johnnie McKinley, which is that one of the most "reliable sources of information" about what students know and can do is the classroom teacher.

McKinley, the Seattle Public Schools effectiveness consultant, noted that teachers see the results of schooling every day in their classrooms. "We have students' products, we see them working in groups—teachers know a child's capacities," she said, and the information that can be gathered from such classroom-based observations "is much more valuable than what can be discerned by a standardized test, which offers only a snapshot."

Still, McKinley conceded that teachers often lack confidence in the validity of the data they collect. Her conference workshop, *Right on Target: Developing Classroom-Based Observational Assessments*, addressed that stumbling block and gave teachers the tools they need to "standardize" the observations they make. Using the tools should, in turn, help build teachers' confidence about their ability to accurately assess their students. "I want you to have a disposition about the task that says, 'I'm competent to make these observations,'" McKinley stated.

The Process

The first step for teachers who want to develop classroom-based observational assessments is to review district standards and identify learning objectives for students, McKinley explained. Teachers then need to ask "What information can I collect that will tell me whether a child can meet a particular standard? What information must I collect to validate what I see?"

Establishing clear performance criteria for judging student work is the next key task. Teachers need to "look at what we want kids to create or perform," McKinley said. "What are kids going to be doing?" For example, if speaking effectively in front of a group is a learning objective, the teacher must ask: "What will I see when a student gives an exemplary presentation? What does exemplary public speaking look like?" The teacher then makes a list of the traits or characteristics that are expected. And that, McKinley stated, is the list of criteria from which a checklist or rating scale can be developed.

It's a deceptively simple process, she warned, noting that it's sometimes difficult to be "very clear" about what students should demonstrate. Teachers often want to include unobservable value judgments in their lists of criteria, such as *the student is motivated* or *the student is taking responsibility for her work*. "How can you describe those?" McKinley asked. "If you cannot describe a characteristic so that it's observable and concrete, and easily understood by anybody—by a person standing at a bus stop, for instance—it's a characteristic that cannot be observed."

The Advantages

When teachers have developed a reliable rating scale, when they've "put performance criteria on paper, published those criteria, and given them to students and parents," they've created a tool that supports children "in achieving standards through instruction and assessment," McKinley declared. Classroom-based observations "are responsive to the child's needs," she explained. When observing children "in the moment," teachers can adjust learning activities to help children reach a particular standard. What's more, when teachers tell students how they're progressing, they show children that what they're learning in the classroom is important. "It validates all their progress," McKinley said. Well-crafted observational assessment tools can also help teacher's combat bias, "a barrier to allowing children to show us what they can do." Teachers may have a great learning activity, McKinley stated, but if the language is obscure or if it contains terms that some children are not familiar with, then the task simply is not effective.

Teachers must also "be more thoughtful about their own prejudices"—about their pet peeves and the stereotypes they might hold. When performance criteria are written down, teachers can set preconceptions aside and look objectively at the behaviours, McKinley explained. "When giving a presentation, if a child is looking at the audience and speaking clearly, the teacher can mark him high in that standard without letting personal biases interfere."

The Limitations

As valid as classroom-based observations may be, there are some "truths" that McKinley wanted all participants to understand. Drawn on one of the hangouts she distributed was a grid with four quadrants that illustrated the limitations of this form of assessment. "There are some things kids know that you can observe; some things kids know that you can't observe," she noted. "There are some things kids don't know that you can observe, and there are some things kids don't know that can't be observed."

The message to teachers from this explanation: "Make sure you use lots of methods for assessment—and know the limitations of each," McKinley advised. Here's another truth, she added: "If we assess it, people believe it's important."

