

Evaluating the Classroom Teacher

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Abstract

With an increased focus on the need to evaluate teachers' classroom related dispositions, many professionals in the field have developed assessment tools and checklists to address this concern. This paper briefly summarises approaches used to evaluate the classroom teacher and introduces the reader to issues relating to the assessment of classroom dispositions.

Introduction

This paper focuses on various approaches that have been used to evaluate the classroom teacher, and includes issues related to assessing the teachers' classroom-related dispositions as part of the evaluation process.

In almost every profession, employees are required to undergo a scheduled job-related evaluation; teachers included. Depending on the school district, the teacher evaluation period can range between 12 and 18 months, or longer, with at least annual evaluations for newly hired teachers. Yet not all teacher evaluations focus on the same measures or employ the same evaluation techniques. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education called for evaluations to include information relating to student growth and using multiple measures in the evaluations (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Prior to this, many teacher evaluations were comprised mainly of classroom observations (Song, Wayne, Garet, Brown & Rickles 2021). These observations frequently included various checklists that the observer (usually a school administrator) would either check or leave blank depending on what was observed or not. Toch & Rothman (2008) referred to these types of assessments as "drive-by" observations. These "evaluations" provide little feedback to the educator, and often leave them wondering if their performance in the classroom is adequate. As Tredway, Militello, & Simon (2021) state "Such approaches are ineffective for changing teacher practice, and principals who continue to use them don't feel effective in improving teacher practice; there is little focus on maintaining or improving classroom related skills or behaviours observed" (p. 3). In 1996, Brant reported that both principals and teachers are frustrated with conventional evaluation practices that are used for tenure and promotion purposes (Brant, 1996). Likewise, Marzano (2012) asserted that teacher evaluation in the past has done very little to produce teacher quality, which has resulted in the non-improvement of teacher skills. Despite this, these evaluative practices still persist in many schools. Those who support these ongoing evaluations feel that they provide motivation for teachers to improve their overall classroom skills (Taylor & Tyler, 2012).

The 2014 Department of Education policy (mentioned just prior) also called for measures of student growth to be included in the overall teacher evaluation. Here, states and districts are required to incorporate information about student growth into overall ratings for teachers. Thus, observations alone were deemed unacceptable. As a result, many states included students' test data, often referred to as Value Added Measures, to supplement teacher evaluations. The general idea to this approach was to try to link teachers' classroom instruction (among other variables) with students' academic growth. In 2009, only 15 states required objective measures of student growth in teacher evaluations; by 2015 this number increased nearly threefold to 43 states. (Jacobs, 2009). This approach, however, has been criticised in that it was implemented without solid research or validity studies (Amrein-Beardsley & Holloway, 2019). Despite the serious limitations, this evaluation approach has been used to make decisions related to teacher retention, pay increases, and decisions for dismissal (Berliner & Glass, 2014).

Other federal initiatives, such as Race to the Top (RttT) have led to the development of new teacher evaluation measures that include student test performance and enhanced observations. (Cannata et al., 2017). Under this initiative, approaches to refining teacher evaluations was a major focus. Under RttT, refined teacher valuations included frequent annual observations for all teachers, numerical scoring, a detailed rubric of instructional expectations, and students' standardised test score data (Derrington & Campbell, 2018). Once again, teachers were evaluated, in part, on the performance of their students in State-wide achievement tests. From 2009 to 2013, 31 states adopted reforms that required the use of student test score data in teacher evaluations (Bleiberg & Harbatkin, 2020). In Florida, for example, teachers received ratings of either "highly qualified," "qualified," "needs improvement," or "unsatisfactory" based on their evaluations that included student test data (Florida State Senate, 2011).

Most agree that teacher evaluations should include more than a simple checklist or brief classroom observation and formal teacher evaluations are more likely to be a fair measure of teacher performance when based on multiple measures (Kane, Taylor, Tyler, & Wooten, 2011). Zhang (2008) reports that using multiple sources can validate one another, thereby reducing bias and increasing validity. Adding to this, Maslow & Kelly (2012) include three important categories that should be included in all teacher evaluations: summative, formative, and systemic feedback. In fact, teachers prefer an evaluation that includes specific feedback that they can use to make changes as needed in their classrooms (Reddy et al. 2017). Finally, Looney (2011) reported that "well-designed teacher evaluation systems, aligned with professional learning and development, can contribute to improvements in the quality of teaching and raise student achievement" (p. 440).

Another issue relating to the evaluation approach used is that, in most cases, exceptional education teachers are evaluated on the same form as regular education teachers, despite the differences in their classroom expectations (Johnson, Crawford, Zheng, & Moylan, 2020). Thus, the validity/reliability of the evaluation tool used might be in question.

Assessing Classroom-related Dispositions

With an increased focus on a teachers' classroom- related dispositions, this area has become an important component of many teacher evaluations. This area of focus doesn't key in on student test scores, but what some refer to as "soft skills", likened to a doctor's bedside manner. One

probable reason these changes have come about is that numerous research studies have focused specifically on teachers' classroom-related dispositions and their positive relationship to student learning (Notar, Riley, & Taylor, 2009). Likewise, Johnston, Almerico, Henriott, & Shapiro (2011) reported that a teacher's classroom-related set of dispositions is an important predictor of teaching effectiveness. Thus, teacher dispositions become an important part of every classroom; regular education, exceptional education, or specials such as the resource room, the fine arts/music education classroom, or even physical education.

Additionally, many accreditation agencies now require teacher preparation programs to address classroom-related dispositions. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Professionals (CAEP), the primary national accrediting body for all teacher education programs in the United States requires that teacher education programs assess candidates' dispositions regularly (CAEP 2018), and document that preservice teachers demonstrate various classroom-related dispositions prior to graduation. Likewise, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Core Standards (2018, 2021) include several key elements that specifically address teacher dispositions.

Another key reason for including a teacher's classroom-related dispositions in the overall evaluation process is that there is a relationship between teachers' dispositions and the quality of student learning (Notar, Riley, & Taylor, 2009). Wilkerson (2006) went as far to indicate "dispositions are, in the long run, more important than knowledge and skills" (p. 2), while Sherman (2006) suggested that a teacher's overall classroom approach may be more important than his/her pedagogical skills and knowledge when it comes to student learning.

Assessing teachers' classroom-related dispositions, however, can prove problematic in that the assessment of dispositions is not as "clear-cut" as assessing a teacher's ability to teach academic skills, since there are various definitions of dispositions, and lack of agreement regarding which specific dispositions are important and need to be assessed. To complicate the issue, teacher dispositions that may be considered important or essential in one classroom may be considered unimportant in another. A special education elementary teacher, for instance, may be expected to demonstrate certain classroom dispositions that may be considered inappropriate for a high school science teacher.

Literature Review

A review of the literature provides one with an abundance of terms, definitions, and descriptions of what are considered to be desirable teacher dispositions. The term "disposition" has been linked to anything from attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, values, and even personal experiences (Choi, Benson, & Shudak, (2016). Notar, Riley, & Taylor (2009) include enthusiasm, sensitivity, responsibility, commitment, professionalism, skilful preparation, a sense of respect for others, communication, and appropriate dress, deportment, and demeanour. Bauer & Thornton (2013) concluded that creativity, and the ability to be critical are essential classroom-related dispositions. Shao & Tamashiro (2013) report sensitivity to student needs, improved attitudes towards learning, and heightened awareness of varied cultural and personal differences as key dispositions.

Villegas (2007) defines dispositions as the tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances based on their beliefs while Lampert, & Browne, (2022) indicate that dispositions are those internal conditions (attitudes, values, beliefs, thoughts, etc.) that influence our external behaviours (actions and interactions with students and others); people may be predisposed to certain actions based on these characteristics. Finally, Jensen, Whiting, & Chapman (2018) list empathy, meekness, social awareness, inclusion, and advocacy in their summary of key classroom-related dispositions.

To complicate the issue even further, in order to have a valid and reliable assessment of classroom-related dispositions, an operational definition is essential for the observer to determine if it is being displayed or not. However, as Welch, et al. (2010) indicate, there is a lack of operational definitions of behaviours thought to be related to teacher dispositions which in turn limits the observer from obtaining reliable evaluation information. The assessment of “professionalism” for example, might include certain behaviours for one observer, but not for another. Zygmunt, Cipollone, & Tancock (2020) note the term dispositions is “imprecise and somewhat nebulous . . .” (p. 1301). Thus, again, to obtain valid and reliable measures of teacher dispositions, specific disposition-related behaviours need to be identified and operationally defined.

Since there is no “universal” assessment tool or teacher evaluation standard, what is expected and assessed during the teacher’s evaluation can differ from state to state, county to county, district to district, and even school to school. Yet as indicated above, assessing classroom-related dispositions is a crucial part of the overall education process (Notar, Riley, & Taylor, 2009), and should be included in each and every teacher evaluation. At the same time those responsible for evaluating teachers are faced with even more challenges when attempting to evaluate teacher dispositions.

If classroom-related dispositions are to be included in the teacher evaluation system, a first step should be to identify specific classroom-related dispositions that are important for student success. Then, provide operational definitions of the target behaviours to be assessed. This step is crucial for the overall reliability of the assessment tool. Finally, develop a scoring rubric that includes the operationally defined dispositions, which includes scoring guidelines. It is important to conduct a pretest of the finalised rubric whereby several observers rate a teacher at the same time. They can then discuss their findings and any potential issues with the rubric and focus on the items that need further refinement. After using the rubric in the evaluation, meet with the teacher personally, discuss the results of the observation, and share the finalised rubric.

Disposition Descriptions

So, where to begin? A review of available classroom-related checklists key in on several dispositions that teachers need to engage in or refine for classroom success. There are numerous disposition assessment tools available, yet not all allow for accurate, reliable collection of disposition-related classroom behaviours. Many do not include an operational definition of the disposition to be assessed.

Common to most teacher assessment tools is the area of communication; effective communication is essential for learning to occur. As Yavuz, & Güzel (2020) point out, “A teacher who communicates effectively can also activate this skill in the classroom and ensure that his students are included in the teaching and learning process” (p 135). Yet, as indicated prior, many teacher evaluation tools do not operationally define what is meant by communication. Most evaluation tools or checklists simply state “Communicates Effectively.” Thus, for accurate data collection/evaluation, the assessment of communication needs to be operationally defined. For example, “Greet students as they enter the classroom”; “Communicates effectively using Standard English”; “Uses oral communication skills based on the age/grade level of the learner”; “Checks frequently to see if students in the class understand what is being said”. One also needs to consider the tone of voice when assessing oral language skills. Examples include “Delivers classroom lessons enthusiastically, in an upbeat manner”; “Delivers verbal rewards in an enthusiastic manner”; “Uses a firm, yet not punitive tone when reprimanding students”.

In the overall category of communication, one also needs to consider written communication skills. Some key elements in this category can include “Provides positive written comments to students on graded work”; “Written work is completed with correct grammar/spelling”; “Accepts and applies written feedback from others to improve his/her teaching skills”. Finally, “Hand-written materials are legible” should also be included in this category. Since most communication between teachers and parents are in the written form, the above suggestions are relevant also. As Sylaj, & Sylaj (2020) remind us, teachers should provide ongoing written communication to parents and provide family members with opportunities for ongoing communication in return. Thus, “Uses correct grammar/spelling when communicating with parents/guardian(s)” should be included in the overall evaluation.

Another key disposition commonly evaluated is the ability to modify/adapt the lesson so that all students, including those with an exceptionality and those whose first language is not English can succeed. This is one of the key premises behind Response to Intervention (RtI). Once again, unless operationally defined, accurate assessment in this area can be questionable. To be more specific when assessing teachers in this area, examples can include “Modifies or adapts the lesson plan to meet the needs of diverse students in the classroom”; “Uses a variety of approaches (handouts/worksheets/ manipulatives/visuals, etc.) when delivering classroom lessons”; “Checks frequently to ensure all students in the class understand the material being taught”. Finally, “Encourages all students to participate in classroom discussions/presentations” should also be assessed.

Next is the category of Subject Knowledge—the classroom teacher needs to be the expert in the field that s/he holds the responsibility for teaching. Ellis (2007) posits that the more subject knowledge a teacher possesses, the better the outcomes are for their students. Students will ask questions when they feel that the subject matter is confusing or too difficult. Some examples for evaluation purposes can include “Is able to explain the lesson/subject material in detail so that everyone in the classroom understands”; or “Is able to clarify the subject matter when students ask questions”; or “Can define key terms related to the lesson accurately”. Then, related to maintaining subject knowledge, “Attends conferences/workshops (live/virtual) to keep abreast of

current research/developments in the field”; “Maintains membership in professional teacher-related organisations”.

Appearance – a somewhat “touchy” area to address and evaluate. Zhao, Zhang , & Cheng (2015) reported that “...student's attitude toward teacher and the relationship with the teacher has a close tie with teacher's clothes” (p 560). Not only how a teacher dresses is important, but their hairstyle also. Thus, when assessing the teacher’s appearance, one may consider “Dresses a professional manner when teaching or attending school/work related events”, or “Covers any body ink/tattoos that may be considered offensive while teaching”, or “Complies with the school/district dress code”. It is important to note that how elementary teachers dress will probably differ from how high-school teachers dress. And likewise for the music teacher, or physical education coach.

Likewise, effective classroom management is essential for learning to occur. This includes everything that happens in the classroom beginning when the first student enters the classroom until the last student leaves the classroom. Numerous research articles have addressed the importance of having an effective classroom management plan. The research conducted by Herman, Reinke, Dong, & Bradshaw (2022) indicates that there is a relationship between effective classroom management and student achievement. Some assessment ideas include “Maintains a classroom environment that focuses on positive interactions with all students”; “Addresses classroom misbehaviour quickly using procedures known to be effective and ethical”; “Treats all students fairly and with the same expectations”; “Able to make changes to the schedule/routine as a result of unforeseen events”; and “Transitions from one activity to the next smoothly without hesitation”.

Collaboration – Teamwork can make or break the classroom. The importance of parent–teacher collaboration and its positive impact on children is well documented in the literature. (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Relating to collaboration between teachers, Fells (2021) reported that not only is communication a key to effective co-teaching/collaboration, but respect, trust, and power are also crucial in the co-teaching approach. Many teacher evaluation checklists simply include “Works well with others”, however this might be too vague. Specific examples in this category can include “Willingly collaborates with others relating to new school wide initiatives or refinements to the curriculum including school-wide committees”; “Partners with parents to enhance the overall learning experiences for their child(ren)”; “Team teaches effectively with other professionals in the classroom”.

Professionalism- this category can focus on several in-and-out of the classroom dispositions. “Maintains a social media site that does not contain offence pictures or material”; “Always discusses school/classroom policies and issues in a positive manner”.

Finally, Timeliness – this disposition can be addressed in several areas. Some examples include “Arrives punctually to work and is ready to begin the class day when students arrive”; “Grades student work in a timely manner (within xxxx days)”; “Comes to work prepared to teach the daily classroom lessons.” Then, “Completes assignments/responsibilities within the time frame given”, and finally, “Responds to parent queries/email/ within xxxxx days”.

After identifying and selecting classroom-related dispositions, and developing operational definitions, a scoring rubric should be developed (if not already available). The rubric needs to list the operationally defined dispositions to be assessed along with scoring criteria. Some rubrics incorporate a simple checklist that incorporates a ‘YES/NO’ approach, or ‘OBSERVED/NOT OBSERVED’ approach. On the other hand, many rubrics use a Likert scale, and if this approach is used, the various scoring elements of the rubric need to be clearly defined. For example, if the scoring categories of the rubric include ‘ALWAYS’, ‘MOST OF THE TIME’, ‘SOMETIMES’, and ‘SELDOM’, then each one of these categories needs to be clarified. Does ‘MOST OF THE TIME’ mean 4 days out of a 5-day workweek? Does ‘SELDOM’ refer to once a week? etc. The scoring options should be stated clearly so that the observer conducting the evaluation does not have to guess which scoring category corresponds to the behaviour observed.

Some evaluation approaches use both a yes/no checklist combined with a Likert scale tool. Whenever possible two independent observers should observe the teacher ‘in action’ and compare their findings. Interrater reliability can be computed based on their ratings. Whatever approach is used, there needs to be a section for the evaluator to write comments or explain in further detail his/her ratings. Then when the evaluation is shared with the teacher, these comments can justify the specific rating.

Conclusion

There are numerous disposition checklists and rating scales available, and one should carefully consider the key points listed in this paper prior to implementation. The assessment and/or evaluation of the classroom teacher needs to be an accurate representation of the teacher’s overall abilities and skills; not just a brief encounter that fails to collect much needed information. Likewise, the evaluator should observe in different classroom environments, at various times of the day, and with a different group of students in the classroom to the extent possible. Thus, a true picture of the teacher’s skills and abilities can be observed under different environments and circumstances.

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