

You can't judge a school by a classroom, or **can you?**

By Howard Pitler & Elizabeth Hubbell

Stepping into a classroom is unpredictable, even when a visit is scheduled in advance and the objective has been shared ahead of time. Classroom observations, by their nature, surprise, confound, fascinate, or sometimes just go awry. Yet, they also can provide a clear picture of the teaching and learning that is occurring in the classroom—and whether a culture of high expectations exists in a school.

Observations provide school leaders with invaluable data on everything from how students are grouped for instruction to how well professional development initiatives are translated in the classroom to teachers' beliefs about the abilities of their students and themselves.

At McREL, our Power Walkthrough® software, which allows administrators and teachers to observe specific, research-based indicators related to student achievement, has provided a vehicle for gathering these types of data to create a picture of what classrooms across the nation really look like. To date, we have gathered data from more than 27,000 classroom observations across 27 states, which we've aggregated into a common database. These data have

been gathered by administrators and teacher leaders who have participated in a two-day workshop, which showed them what to look for and how to accurately record strategies they see teachers using. The specific indicators that we teach observers to look for are:

- Primary instructional strategy the teacher is using
- Level of Bloom's Taxonomy the lesson focuses on
- How students are grouped for instruction
- Technology the teacher is using
- Technology the students are using
- Primary evidence of learning during the visit

Data portray a disappointing picture

First, let's look at what the data tell us about the teaching strategies used in the classroom. In the workshop, observers learned about the nine categories of research-based instructional strategies identified in McREL's *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Because teachers simultaneously use multiple strategies in a lesson, observers learned how to determine the primary, or most-used, strategy. Our data reveal that the most-used strategy is "Practice," followed closely by "Cues and Questions" (see Fig. 1). In general, teachers rarely used "Generating and Testing Hypotheses," a strategy research suggests will move students to high levels of learning. The data also show little evidence of "Summarizing" and "Note taking" or "Identifying Similarities and Differences," the category with the highest effect size relative to student achievement. It also is telling that classroom observers often noted "No Research-based Strategy" was used.

Another set of data focuses on the level of Bloom's Taxonomy used in classrooms. From lowest to highest, the levels of the taxonomy are "Remember," "Understand," "Apply," "Analyze," "Evaluate," and "Create." Our data (see Fig. 2) indicate that 25 percent of all classroom lessons are at the lowest

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Figure 1. Instructional Strategies

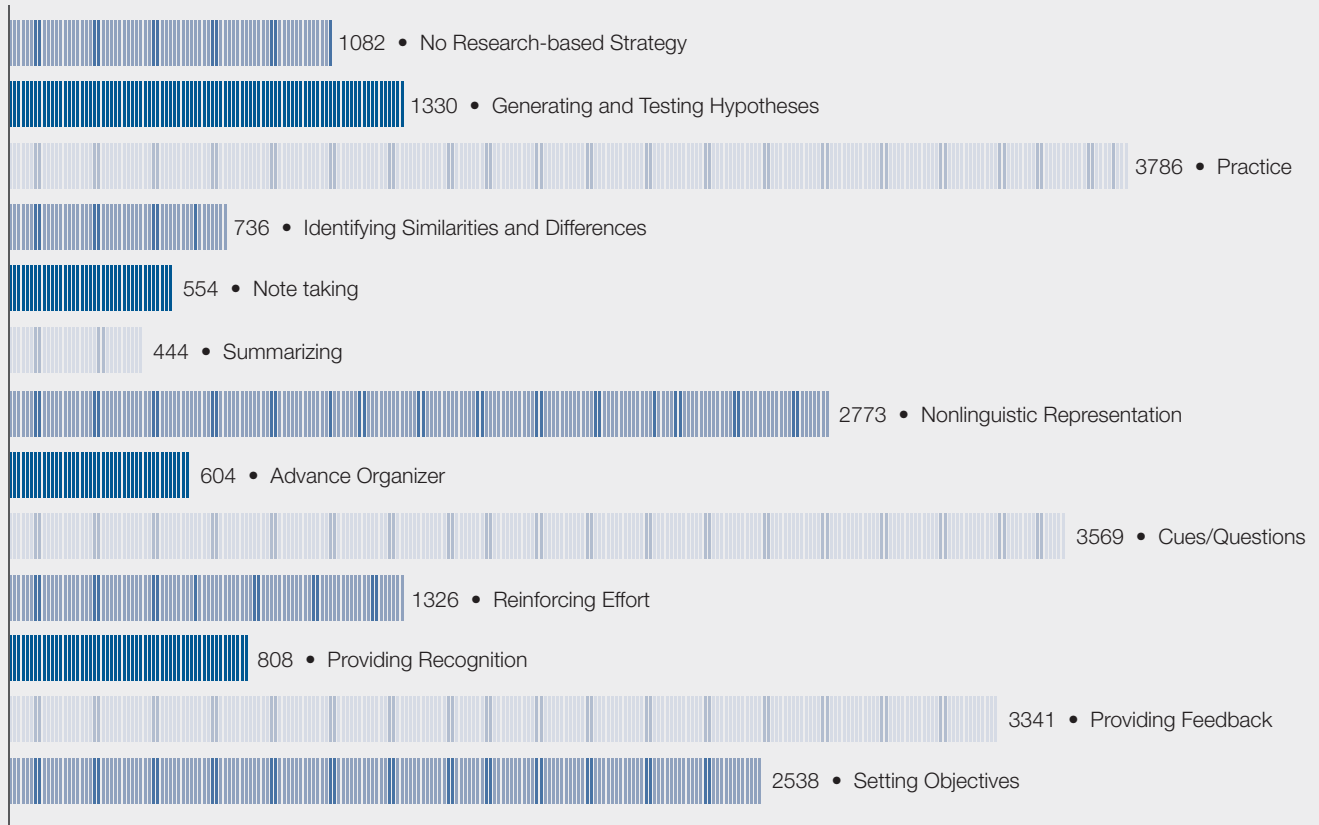


Figure 2. Bloom's Taxonomy Data

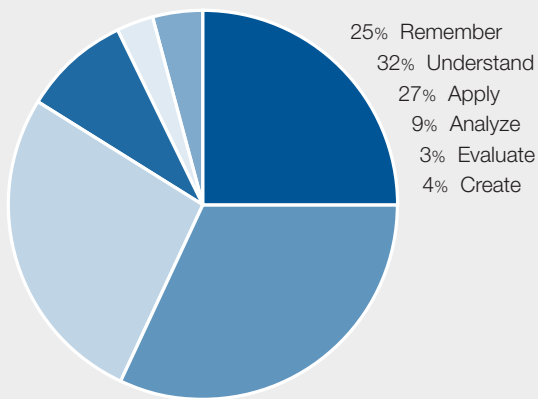
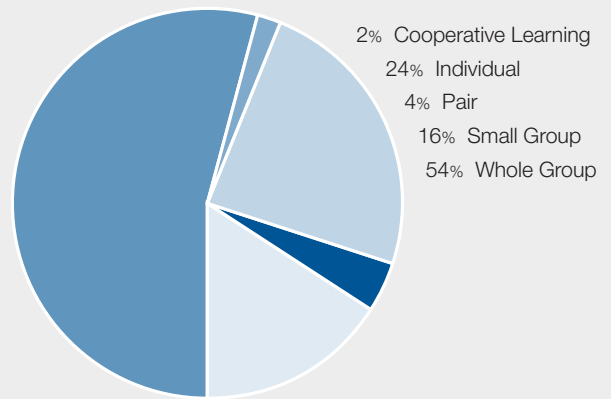


Figure 3. Student Grouping



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level (Remember), with another 32 percent at the Understand level. Students spend over half of their days in the classroom learning at the lowest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy or, put differently, students are engaged in lessons that allow them to Evaluate and Create just seven percent of the time.

In noting how students were grouped for instruction (see Fig. 3), observers recorded that whole group settings occurred in 54 percent of all observations, and students were grouped individually in almost 25 percent of observations. Cooperative learning, one of the instructional strategies identified as highly effective in *Classroom Instruction that Works*, made up a scant two percent of all observations.

Two other data sets we reviewed were 1) teacher use of technology and 2) student use of technology. We looked at the broad range of technologies outlined in the book *Using Technology with Classroom Instruction that Works* (Pitler, Hubbell, Kuhn, & Malenoski, 2007), including word processing, brainstorming software, multimedia, Web resources, and data probes. It was startling to find that no technology was used by teachers in 80 percent of all observations, especially because these data include schools with 1:1 laptop programs. The data on students' use of technology are even less optimistic, with fewer students (81%) using technology than teachers.

From these data, we know that students in many classrooms across America primarily work in whole group or individual activities, are engaged at the lowest two levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, and are doing practice activities or listening as the teacher asks questions. We also know they rarely use any

technology while at school, even though technology is a major part of their lives outside of the classroom. Obviously, there is much room for improvement.

Steps toward a positive school culture

Data gathered during observations allow schools and districts to improve the ability to focus on one area at a time and set clear and attainable goals to make positive changes.

The indicators we've discussed here are interrelated parts of a larger dynamic system, and all contribute to a culture of high expectations. To improve the classroom environment and make school the dynamic, interactive, and enlightening experience it should be for children, school and district leaders should use observations to help, among many other things, determine the culture of their school before, during, and after implementing school improvement initiatives.

References

- Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Pitler, H., Hubbell, E., Kuhn, M., & Malenoski, K. (2007). *Using technology with Classroom Instruction that Works*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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