

Asking why when observing classrooms

By Howard Pitler with Bryan Goodwin

As a principal or teacher-leader, you know that one way to be a more effective instructional leader is to spend time observing teachers' classrooms. But what should you look for when you drop in on a classroom?

Most likely, you notice if students are on-task and teachers are using sound teaching techniques, such as the nine categories of instructional strategies found in McREL's ASCD publication, *Classroom Instruction that Works*.¹ (Actually, we think this is such a valuable framework for classroom observations that we developed "Power Walkthrough" software. Using hand-held devices, instructional leaders can quickly and easily monitor teachers' use of *Classroom Instruction that Works* and other effective teaching strategies).

Yet simply observing *what* teachers are doing is not enough. The real value of observing classrooms comes afterward, during follow-up coaching sessions when you discuss not only what's being done, but also *how*, *when*, and *why* teachers are doing it. Often, teachers design lessons and units without fully considering the nature of the types of learning involved and which instructional strategies are best suited to help students meet learning goals. That's not surprising, as many professional development programs focus on telling teachers what to do and showing them how to do it. These programs usually fail to explain when or why to use a particular strategy, but to truly improve their classroom practice, teachers must develop this deeper level of understanding and expertise.

Take cooperative learning, for example. It's one of the nine categories of instruction identified in *Classroom Instruction that Works* and hardly a revolutionary concept. Probably most teachers are already using this strategy regularly, but how many are *intentional* about it? That is, do teachers know why they're placing their students in small groups and to what end? Or are they simply creating small groups now and then to break up the monotony of whole-class lectures?

When teachers are intentional with their practice, they're able to explain why they're using strategies such as cooperative learning—perhaps it's to give students a chance at the end of a unit to process with one another what they've learned, or to develop critical thinking by sharing individual perspectives on a piece of literature, or to encourage creative thinking and problem solving by exchanging ideas with one another.

In short, while it's important to observe what teachers are doing in the classroom, it's equally important that during follow-up coaching sessions you ask the question (in the spirit of professional inquiry and growth, not accusation): Why were you using that strategy?

Being intentional is the key to effective instruction. And to be intentional, instructional leaders must constantly ask why—Why am I using this strategy, with these students, to teach this lesson? **CS**

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¹Marzano, 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.