Getting to Quality: A Meeting of the Minds

High-quality instruction is reflected in a number of indicators, and learning to note those indicators will help you know when you’re observing it.

By Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

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You can practice identifying the components of high-quality instruction in this real lesson—exactly what you might see on a learning walk: www.principals.org/pl0910frey.

We’ve all been witness to conversations that are going nowhere. Both parties are trying to explain their positions, not to listen to each other. They are talking about two different things, and although we can see that they’re not on the same page, they can’t. Both leave feeling frustrated, defeated, and ill-disposed toward each other.

This is not just a phenomenon of family debates about politics and religion—it occurs in professional exchanges, especially between administrators and teachers. It’s unlikely that the parties involved don’t know their jobs. On the contrary, schools are filled with caring and committed educators. Yet sometimes those accomplished professionals have a hard time talking with one another, especially about high-quality instruction. A fundamental understanding has been overlooked: without a shared definition of high-quality instruction, teachers and administrators fail to truly communicate.

When educators share a vision of quality instruction, meaningful conversations about practice can occur. The indicators of high-quality classroom instruction can form the basis for walk-throughs, teacher observations, and evaluation procedures. Without a mutual understanding of what those indicators are, the teacher is immune to feedback from the administrator. Too often, well-meaning administrators talk about one thing while the teacher talks about another. In the end, there’s little in the way of productive decisions, understanding, or progress.

Each month in this column, we’ll explore an aspect of high-quality instruction in depth. But the first step is to identify the components of high-quality instruction and its indicators and discuss ways to formulate them for your school.

Seeing the Good

The components and indicators of high-quality instruction are based on data collected in thousands of classroom observations and represent current research on providing sound instruction through continuous improvement (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

Establishing purpose. This typically consists of the content purpose (what is being learned) and the language purpose (how it will be used). The emphasis is on the immediate lesson, and the lens is the student’s. When a student can explain what he or she is learning and how he or she is applying it today, you know that the purpose has been firmly established.

Thinking aloud and modeling. Students deserve to see how an expert makes decisions about how concepts, ideas, and skills are applied. The think-aloud procedure shows learners disciplinary cognition at work. Modeling and demonstrating highlight the conditional knowledge of when, why, and how a concept is used.

Complex tasks. Group work is more than pushing desks together—it is the setting for fostering cognitive and metacognitive thinking in the company of peers. Tasks must have depth and complexity, or students will simply divide the work and assemble it later, so indicators of complexity must be defined and shared.

High expectations. The evidence on holding high expectations for students is strong, but the reality is that it is not evenly applied. A recent survey found that although 84% of teachers reported that they have the skills
to make it possible for all students to succeed, only 36% said that all of their students could succeed (MetLife, 2010). Some of the indicators of high expectations are that instruction meets grade-level standards, goal setting is evident, and students are expected to persevere.

Guided instruction. The strategic use of questions, prompts, and cues, as well as direct explanation and modeling when needed, form the nexus of the art and science of teaching. When guiding their students’ learning, teachers check for understanding, scaffold instruction, and provide corrective feedback.

Academic language. Students must use the academic language of the discipline when speaking and in writing. Academic language is supported through the use of language frames, meaningful discussions, and opportunities to interact with one another and with the content.

Background knowledge. One of the strongest predictors of comprehension and academic achievement is the extent to which a learner possesses the requisite background knowledge. When students have gaps in background knowledge, it is necessary to build it. In other cases, the background knowledge may be there, but the learner is not skilled at applying it. Background knowledge should be assessed, built, and activated during lessons.

Assessment that feeds back and feeds forward. How do teachers give and receive feedback and how is feedback used to plan future instruction? In an era when formative assessment has become a common feature in many schools, how can this practice be leveraged to raise the quality of instruction?

Getting to Quality Indicators

Understanding these indicators is a first step in having conversations about high-quality instruction. But the details of what constitutes good instruction must be determined and refined through internal discussions with and by practitioners and administrators in the contexts of their own schools. Schools are, in part, influenced by what is currently occurring in classrooms, so one way to begin to define high-quality instruction is to look for patterns as well as solitary examples during learning walks with groups of classroom teachers. Learning walks are short, arranged classroom visits, usually 15 to 20 minutes in length. Groups of 5 to 10 teachers visit the classrooms together in the company of a skilled facilitator, often an administrator or an instructional coach, to examine one specific aspect of classroom instruction (not every aspect) to formulate a definition of high-quality instruction.

For example, a series of learning walks that is focused on task complexity asks the participants to examine productive group work: Is the task at hand based on grade-level standards? Is it novel in its application of a set of concepts or skills, or is it a duplication of what the teacher has already done? Does the design of the task provide opportunities for students to interact with one another? After visiting classrooms, the group informally discusses what they have seen and begins to note indicators of the focus element.

The norms for learning walks should be established before entering any classroom. It is important to remember that the individual teacher is not being evaluated—nor is the principal, for that matter. The goal is to look for evidence that relates to school improvement efforts and their...
Before the Learning Walk
- Identify the purpose of the learning walk and the quality indicator to be observed.
- Locate teachers who are willing to be observed during the learning walk.
- Share the purpose and the highlighted quality indicator with them and create a schedule.
- Identify the facilitator for the learning walk.
- Develop a team of 5 to 10 practitioners who will participate.
- Elicit potential quality indicator questions and compile them for the team.

The Day of the Learning Walk
- Meet with the team to review purposes and norms.
- Provide the team with three to five quality indicator questions for discussion.
- Lead the team through a series of classrooms, stopping after every third classroom to discuss observations.
- Note significant observations for later use by the team and others.

After the Learning Walk
- Synthesize the team’s verbal observations and share them with the volunteer teachers.
- Coordinate a team of educators to refine the list of quality indicators that emerges over several learning walks.
- Meet with professional development committee to formulate next steps.

Impact on student learning. To keep the learning walks from shifting to evaluation, we encourage observers to make mental notes only because it can be intimidating for volunteer teachers to see observers furiously writing down notes.

Learning walks are valuable to novice teachers and seasoned ones, so the composition of the group should be carefully considered. At times, we have found it useful to lead a group of teachers through classrooms in a different content area, such as leading a group of science educators through English classrooms, so that teachers shift their attention from content-specific issues to instruction. At other times, we’ve walked a building with new teachers and their support providers.

We’ve made a planning checklist of essential work to do before, during, and after the learning walk. (See figure 1.) You may also want to consider inviting administrators from other buildings to participate in learning walks. It can be insightful to hear what they are noticing as you develop quality indicators. Over time, you’ll develop a valuable list that has been built through consensus. These quality indicators can shift the conversation so that there can truly be a meeting of the minds. PL

REFERENCES