

What Are People Looking For When They Walk Through My Classroom?

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nce upon a time, a long, long time ago, teachers were allowed to close their classroom doors, and basically teach their students whatever they wanted to, however they wanted to, whenever they wanted to. Classroom teachers were given complete independence, and they very rarely ever saw an administrator in their classrooms.

Those days are gone. Now, hardly a day goes by that administrators are not walking through classrooms observing instruction. Modern principals strive to be in every classroom every day. Assistant principals and curriculum specialists come by and observe instruction regularly. Even district administrators drop in from time to time.

It's only fair to ask, what are these people looking for when they come in your class? In a perfect world, administrators would communicate clear expectations, and they would clearly explain what they want to see when they visit classrooms.

Clearly, we don't live in a perfect world. Teachers are often confused about what administrators are looking for when they visit classrooms and observe instruction.

The truth is, different administrators might be looking for different things when they visit classrooms. However, in my experience, most administrators are looking for some fairly basic things that are hallmarks of "best instructional practices." Most of these hallmarks of effective instruction cut across all grades and subject areas, but since I bring the perspective of a literacy instructional consultant, I am more facile with the hallmarks of high-quality literacy instruction – especially in elementary school. Please keep that in mind as you read this article.

Essentially, when I visit classrooms with administrators, the things we are looking for fall into four major categories:

1. Classroom / Instructional Organization
2. Student Engagement
3. Alignment of Instruction
4. Rigor of Instruction

1. Classroom / Instructional Organization

When a visitor first walks in your classroom, their first impression is very important. Administrators who visit a lot of classrooms quickly learn that disorganized, chaotic classrooms are usually associated with disorganized, chaotic instruction. Effective administrators quickly learn to spot signs of organization, preparedness, and rigorous instruction. Specifically, what I look for in classroom and instructional organization are:

- Clutter, stacks of paper, equipment and instructional materials in disarray are all bad signs.
- Room Arrangement should be conducive to instruction.

- Instructional tools on walls (word walls, phonics charts, etc.) should be up-to-date and there should be clear evidence those tools are being used by the teacher.
- Small-group learning spaces (Guided Reading table, centers, computer station) should be free of clutter, and again, there should be evidence of their daily use.
- Classroom library should be well-stocked, well-organized, and very inviting to the students (see sidebar for more information about classroom libraries).
- Desks (including the teacher's desk) should be orderly and neat.
- It should be clear to the observer that the teacher's lesson is well-planned, and that the teacher has made all necessary preparations for the lesson.
- Materials that students will need should be arranged and prepared prior to each lesson so that the teacher is not wasting time preparing materials for lessons.

Classroom Libraries – One of the Most Important Parts of Room Arrangement

One of the first things I look for when I walk in a classroom is the classroom library. When students have a wide selection of high-quality literature, they are more likely to spend time in sustained and independent reading. And I can usually tell if the library is actually being used. Some classrooms have libraries, but it is fairly obvious that students really don't use that library much. In other, more effective classrooms, the library is a dynamic and inviting space that is organized in ways that really invite and attract students to search the titles and select appropriate books.



2. Student Engagement

Just a few glances around the room tells me a lot about the classroom and instructional organization, but the next thing I look for is highly engaging instruction. I look for signs of wasted time before and between lessons, and I watch the students to see how engaged they are during instruction.

In too many classrooms, what I see is disorganization that leaves students disengaged for long periods of time between lessons. While the teacher is getting materials ready, and preparing for a lesson, the students are very creatively finding ways to keep themselves entertained – that's not good. Any experienced teacher can tell you that getting students back on task after they have been disengaged is a struggle. And during instruction, all-too-often, what I see is a teacher interacting with 4 or 5 students while most of the class just watches quietly. In some classes, there are a few students who are completely disengaged – visibly bored out of their minds, and in some (thankfully rare) cases, I've seen students sound asleep!

Administrators know that the 4 or 5 students they see disengaged from a lesson in a classroom are slipping through the cracks and are very much at-risk for future failure. And administrators also know how to do math – if there are 4 or 5 students completely disengaged in every classroom on campus, that means there are dozens or possibly even hundreds of students slipping through the cracks school-wide.

They also know that the students who are attentively watching but are not actively engaged are not getting as much out of the lesson as the students who are more actively interacting with the teacher. Ideally, administrators like to see all students engaged in the lesson all of the time.

There are some specific clues to student engagement that administrators look for:

- Students should have tasks to work on as soon as they walk in the room.
- Transitions between lessons should be very quick and efficient with a minimum of "down time."
- There are times when the teacher should be doing more of the talking than the students, but much of the time, the students should be doing more talking than the teacher. A simple question administrators often ask is, "Who is doing most of the talking?" It is a bad sign if the teacher is consistently doing most of the talking.
- The instruction and activities should be intrinsically engaging. The teacher's presentation should be lively, coherent, and focused.
- Effective teachers often play more of a "class facilitator" role, facilitating student discussion by asking one question after another and moderating student interactions to ensure that all students are participating in the discussion.
- Questions asked of the students should not be simple, and should require more than simple answers or simple recollection of facts.
- Teachers who use a variety of strategies to keep all students actively engaged in the lesson all of the time tend to be more effective (see sidebar for examples of Universal Student Engagement Strategies).

Examples of Universal Student Engagement Strategies

Popsicle Sticks – Instead of letting students raise their hand in response to questions, write each student's name on a popsicle stick and draw them out at random. All students must pay attention at all times because they never know if their name will be drawn.

Everybody Stand Up – Before asking a question, the teacher asks all students to stand up. Then the teacher says, "I'm going to ask a question, and I want you to sit down when you think of an answer." This gives the students time to think about the question, and it gives the teacher feedback about how many students understand the question. (Variations include "Everybody put your hand on your head;" "everybody raise your hand;" and "everybody put your chin in your hand.")

Talk to Your Neighbor – When the teacher asks a question, all students must briefly discuss the question with their neighbor. In addition to keeping all students engaged, this gives students a chance to organize their thoughts before sharing their views with the whole class.

Summarize Your Learning – After each and every lesson, the teacher asks students to write in a learning log a brief description of what they just learned in the lesson, and questions they still have on the topic.

Quick Write – During a lesson, the teacher asks all students to respond to simple questions in writing. Many teachers use adhesive notes or quick-response journals. While the students are writing, the teacher circulates through the room, reading the students' responses.

Universal Response – In response to some questions, all students are expected to provide an answer by giving some sort of signal. Some teachers use "thumbs-up or thumbs-down" to signal agreement or disagreement with the question. Some teachers use A-B-C-D cards to get all students to respond to multiple-choice questions. The point, however, is to get every single student to provide a response to some of the questions in the lesson.

3. Alignment of Instruction

As administrators move from classroom to classroom, they are also looking for evidence that the material being taught in one classroom is comparable to material taught in other classrooms at that grade level. Note, I did not say "identical," because most administrators do not want all teachers to teach in exactly the same way. Teachers are creative people with individual personalities, and they should have some flexibility in how they teach their students. However, while there is room for a little variability, there should also be some similarity and continuity from classroom to classroom, and the teachers should be explicitly teaching the same learning objectives.

Alignment of instruction is important for a variety of reasons. First and most obvious, if a student is moved from Classroom A to Classroom B part-way through the school year, that student should not be lost and confused. Second, alignment encourages teachers to pace their instruction so that key lessons and concepts are not omitted at the end of the school year. Third, alignment encourages teachers to share ideas and learn from each other. And of course, alignment encourages teachers to cover important concepts and skills, even if that teacher is not very comfortable teaching those concepts and skills.

To ensure alignment across classrooms, there are specific clues administrators look for during classroom visits:

- The learning objective should be clearly posted in "kid-friendly" language so that all students know what they are expected to learn. And, of course, the learning objective should be the same in all classrooms at the same grade.
- There should be some evidence that the teachers are talking to each other and sharing instructional ideas.
- Examples of student work related to the current learning objective should be posted with clear criteria explaining how that work demonstrates learning within the learning objective.
- There should be some common assessments or common assignments between classrooms, so that even if the instruction is somewhat different from one classroom to the next, all students are held to the same standard of independent work.

4. Rigor of Instruction

Finally, the most sophisticated administrators look for evidence of rigorous instruction and high expectations for student achievement. It is not enough to have an organized classroom, engaged students, and an aligned curriculum – those components are necessary but not sufficient for student success. One could easily imagine a teacher who is very neat and organized and who keeps all of the students busy all of the time with superficial, empty-headed worksheets. With the bars of success set so high these days, it takes a lot more than busy work to ensure success for all students.

Thus, as administrators walk through classrooms, they also look for evidence that the instruction and student work is of the highest quality. Some would argue that "quality" is in the eye of the beholder, and that it is difficult to define, but high-quality, rigorous instruction is not hard to find when you know what you are looking for.

In general, instruction is rigorous if it meets three criteria:

1. Students are challenged to process new information deeply and to apply new concepts in several different contexts.
2. Because you never really understand something until you try to teach it to somebody else, lessons are designed to ensure that the students have many opportunities to explain their understanding of new concepts and new information to other people (peers, teachers, etc.).

3. Lessons are designed so that students are given a "scaffold" of support until the student is able to demonstrate learning independently.

In broad strokes, lessons that do not meet these three criteria tend to be of lower quality and effectiveness than lessons that do meet these criteria.

When administrators visit classrooms, they look for specific signs of rigorous instruction and high expectations for student work such as:

- The teacher's explanation of concepts is consistently very logical and systematic, very explicit with concrete examples, and very clear and easy to understand.
- Students spend some time in every lesson discussing and/or writing about what they are learning.
- Assessments are thought-provoking and challenging. Multiple-choice format tests are the exception, not the rule. Most assessments are open-ended, and require a demonstration of deep comprehension.
- Worksheets are rare or non-existent. Instead, effective teachers tend to use journals and open-ended questions to help students organize and practice what they learn.
- Instructional activities driven by textbooks or programmatic resources tend to be less rigorous and less effective than activities driven by the teacher.
- Students are able to explain what they are learning, and how that learning is relevant to them, and they can also articulate how that learning can be applied in useful ways.
- Teachers expect students to reach benchmarks and demonstrate knowledge and skills that are clearly beyond "typical" students their age.
- Student work is revised and improved several times (with teacher feedback each time) before the students create a final draft and receive a grade.

Summary and Observation Protocol

Classroom "visits" and "walkthroughs" are annoying – nobody really enjoys them – but unfortunately they are necessary. In a high-stakes world, school administrators absolutely must visit every classroom as often as possible, and provide teachers with guidance and feedback after every visit. Without strong instructional leadership from administrators, schools tend to stagnate, and those schools fail to provide all students with the high-quality education they deserve.

When administrators visit classrooms, their goal should not be to evaluate the teachers – the goal of classroom visits is to gather data about instruction so that the administrators can plan changes and reforms that will most benefit their students. Every visit is a tiny snapshot – one very brief moment in time – and it is impossible to gather much useful information from one single visit. That is why it is critical that school administrators visit classrooms very often (every day if possible) and organize observation data over time.

If an administrator visits classrooms one morning and sees little evidence of alignment of instruction from one classroom to the next, that's no big deal. Things happen to throw teachers off of their instructional plans, and nobody expects all classrooms to be aligned every single moment of every single day. But if that administrator visits day after day and never sees any alignment of instruction, that is cause for grave concern. It is not fair to the students to have the luck of the classroom lottery determine what they are going to learn that year, and administrators have a moral obligation to intervene as instructional leaders and guide teachers to more effective and aligned instruction.

Over many visits, administrators should be able to gather (and share back to teachers) useful information about classroom and instructional organization, student engagement, alignment of instruction, and instructional rigor. Without that feedback, teachers are unlikely to change practice, and students are unlikely to succeed.

To help guide administrators conducting classroom visits, I have created a Classroom Visit and Instructional Observation Protocol to help focus their attention on the four categories described above. (This protocol can also help teachers to conduct a self-assessment, and to help communicate to teachers what administrators are looking for when they visit classrooms.) This protocol describes hallmarks of effective instruction, and helps administrators organize observation data over many classroom visits.

A prudent administrator would likely focus on one or two categories at a time, looking for evidence of organization (for example), and providing feedback to teachers in that one specific area. In my experience, change is more likely to happen when the administrator's focus is clear and explicitly communicated. In general, working with schools, I have found the following guidelines to be helpful:

Performance of School	Focus
20% to 30% of students achieve state expectations	Classroom / Instructional Organization and Alignment
30% to 50% of students achieve state expectations	Alignment and Engagement
50% to 70% of students achieve state expectations	Engagement and Rigor

Protocol Instructions:

Examine each of the alternative scenario descriptions provided, provide a rating on the 1-4 scale, and record specific observations and notes about things you observed to justify your rating. After 3 or more observations in each classroom, summarize your observations on the Summary Evaluation Form, and describe next steps. Provide this feedback to teachers.

Classroom Visit and Instructional Observation Protocol

Teacher: _____ Date & Time of Observation: _____

Classroom and Instructional Organization			
Ideal - 4	Acceptable - 3	Poor - 2	Unacceptable - 1
<p>The learning environment is very neat, organized, and child-friendly.</p> <p>Room arrangement encourages engagement and peer collaboration.</p> <p>Instructional materials are arranged in advance.</p> <p>Space for small-group instruction is clearly available and is obviously used often.</p> <p>There are many supports for student learning posted (e.g. artifacts of instruction, examples of high-quality student work, etc.), and their purpose is quite clear.</p> <p>Classroom library is well stocked and appealing to students.</p>	<p>Some clutter is apparent, but it does not distract from the learning environment.</p> <p>Room arrangement encourages engagement in learning, but does not promote peer-collaboration.</p> <p>Instructional materials are prepared in advance.</p> <p>Space for small-group instruction is available.</p> <p>There are many supports for student learning and examples of student work, but their purpose is not clear.</p> <p>The classroom library is well stocked and kid-friendly</p>	<p>There is too much clutter and disorder, setting a bad example for students and creating distractions for students.</p> <p>Room arrangement does not encourage peer collaboration or engagement in learning.</p> <p>Instructional materials are usually prepared in advance.</p> <p>Space for small-group instruction is cluttered and chaotic.</p> <p>There are a few supports for student learning and examples of student work, but their purpose is unclear.</p> <p>The classroom library is poorly stocked.</p>	<p>There is a great deal of clutter and physical disorder.</p> <p>Room arrangement is haphazard and chaotic.</p> <p>Materials for instruction are not arranged in advance. Teacher spends a lot of time getting organized for lessons.</p> <p>There is no evidence that small-group instruction ever takes place.</p> <p>There are no learning supports or examples of high-quality student work visible.</p> <p>Classroom library is disorganized and is evidently not used by the students.</p>
Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:

Classroom Visit and Instructional Observation Protocol

Teacher: _____ Date & Time of Observation: _____

Student Engagement			
Ideal - 4	Acceptable - 3	Poor - 2	Unacceptable - 1
<p>During the lesson, 100% of the students are engaged 100% of the time.</p> <p>There is almost no "down time" in the classroom. The teacher constantly keeps all students occupied.</p> <p>Teacher asks many questions that encourage students to talk publicly and to share their ideas with their peers.</p> <p>Teacher facilitates discussion, encouraging the students to talk and ask questions in a respectful manner.</p> <p>Students are often engaged in real-world activities that are rich and interesting.</p>	<p>During the lesson, 90% of the students are engaged 100% of the time.</p> <p>There is very little "down time" in the classroom. The teacher has a variety of effective strategies to redirect the students and get them engaged in the lesson.</p> <p>The teacher asks a lot of questions, but the questions are not very provocative or challenging.</p> <p>The teacher allows students to talk and ask questions, but the teacher sometimes loses control when this happens.</p> <p>Students are often engaged in hands-on activities that are interesting and help the students to understand the concepts being taught.</p>	<p>During the lesson, 70% of the students are engaged 100% of the time.</p> <p>There is a fair amount of "down time" in the classroom. When students get off task, the teacher usually just scolds the students for their poor attention.</p> <p>The teacher asks few questions, and they are rarely very provocative or challenging.</p> <p>The teacher is reluctant to let students talk to their peers.</p> <p>Students are guided through hands-on activities, but they are highly scripted and they do not promote a deeper understanding of important concepts.</p>	<p>During the lesson, most of the students are disengaged. Many are politely listening, but there is little evidence of interest in the lesson.</p> <p>Students are kept on-task with superficial busy-work, and the teacher mostly manages</p> <p>The teacher asks few questions, and they are rarely very provocative or challenging.</p> <p>The teacher is reluctant to let students talk to their peers.</p> <p>Students rarely have opportunities to engage in hands-on activities.</p>
Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:

Classroom Visit and Instructional Observation Protocol

Teacher: _____ Date & Time of Observation: _____

Alignment of Instruction			
Ideal - 4	Acceptable - 3	Poor - 2	Unacceptable - 1
<p>The Learning Objective is clearly posted in "kid-friendly" language, and the Learning Objective is similar across classes in the grade level or department.</p> <p>Students have helped to produce clear expectations and criteria for student work which are clearly posted.</p> <p>There are examples of student work posted that illustrate learning and achievement within the Learning Objective.</p> <p>There is evidence that teachers are sharing ideas and suggestions for instructional activities with each other.</p> <p>Students in different classrooms are held to a common standard of achievement, either through common student work, or through common assessments.</p>	<p>The same State Learning Expectation for the week is posted in every class in the grade level or department.</p> <p>There are clear expectations and criteria for student work posted. Evidently they were created by the teacher without involvement from the students, but the students are none-the-less familiar with them.</p> <p>There are examples of student work posted that illustrate learning and achievement within the Learning Objective.</p> <p>There is evidence that teachers are sharing ideas and suggestions for instructional activities with each other.</p> <p>Students in different classrooms take the same test which measures knowledge about the State Learning Expectation.</p>	<p>A Learning Expectation is posted, but the instruction does not seem to be related to the posted Learning Expectation.</p> <p>There are some criteria for student work posted, but students do not seem to be familiar with them.</p> <p>Student work is posted, but it does not seem to be relevant to the learning objective.</p> <p>There is little evidence that teachers are sharing ideas for instruction with each other.</p> <p>Students in different classrooms are using the same materials, but beyond that, there is no common assessment or expectation for a common standard of achievement.</p>	<p>No Learning Expectation is posted. Students can not describe what they are learning or why they are learning it.</p> <p>Students do not know what criteria will be used to evaluate their work, and no such criteria are posted.</p> <p>There is no current student work posted.</p> <p>There is little evidence that teachers are sharing ideas for instruction with each other.</p> <p>Students in different classrooms are learning very different things and are involved in very different activities. A student transferred from one classroom to another would have no common background experience with other students in the new class.</p>
Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:

Classroom Visit and Instructional Observation Protocol

Teacher: _____ Date & Time of Observation: _____

Rigor of Instruction			
Ideal - 4	Acceptable - 3	Poor - 2	Unacceptable - 1
<p>Instruction is extremely clear, logical, and easy-to-understand. Lessons are systematic and concrete.</p> <p>All lessons are designed to scaffold the students to independent work. Teachers model, then encourage collaboration and peer learning, and finally support students to demonstrate learning through independent work.</p> <p>Student work is authentic and rich. Students write essays explaining what they have learned.</p> <p>Students can explain the concepts with very high levels of understanding. They are able to teach the concepts to others if necessary.</p> <p>Students are expected to revise work repeatedly until it reaches a criteria for excellence.</p>	<p>Instruction is clear and systematic, and many concrete examples are provided to illustrate the concept or skill.</p> <p>Most lessons are designed to scaffold the students to independent work. Teachers model, then encourage collaboration and peer learning, and finally support students to demonstrate learning through independent work.</p> <p>Student work is a mixture of essays, thought-problems, and task-sheets. Some assessments are multiple-choice format.</p> <p>Students demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the concepts they are learning.</p> <p>Most student work is revised a few times before a final copy is "published."</p>	<p>Instruction is not very clear or systematic. It is fairly obvious that the teacher does not have a firm grasp of the material.</p> <p>Few lessons are designed to scaffold the students to independent work. Typically the teacher models, and the students copy the teacher's model.</p> <p>Most student work consists of worksheets, answering questions from the book, and multiple-choice format assessments.</p> <p>Students are able to recall facts and surface-level information from the lesson, but do not seem to understand why the concepts are important and relevant.</p> <p>Most student work is submitted for a grade with little feedback or expectation of revision.</p>	<p>Instruction is confusing, and errors are common. The teacher seems to following a script, and does not have a deep understanding of the concepts and skills being taught.</p> <p>Most instruction is "teacher-centered," meaning the teacher guides the students, and the students simply follow the teacher's instruction.</p> <p>Student work consists of worksheets, answering questions from the book, and multiple-choice format assessments.</p> <p>Students are not even able to recall facts and surface-level information from the lesson.</p> <p>Most student work is submitted for a grade with little feedback or expectation of revision.</p>
Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:	Notes and Observations:

Classroom Visit and Instructional Observation Protocol Summary Evaluation Form & Next Steps

Key Focus Area	Notes and Assessment					
Classroom and Instructional Organization	<p>Overall, provide a rating for the classroom and instructional organization</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%;">5 Excellent</td> <td style="width: 20%;">4 Good</td> <td style="width: 20%;">3 Acceptable</td> <td style="width: 20%;">2 Poor</td> <td style="width: 20%;">1 Unacceptable</td> </tr> </table> <p>Provide one or two key observations made during classroom visits that should be addressed right away:</p>	5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Acceptable	2 Poor	1 Unacceptable
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Student Engagement	<p>Overall, provide a rating for the student engagement</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%;">5 Excellent</td> <td style="width: 20%;">4 Good</td> <td style="width: 20%;">3 Acceptable</td> <td style="width: 20%;">2 Poor</td> <td style="width: 20%;">1 Unacceptable</td> </tr> </table> <p>Provide one or two key observations made during classroom visits that should be addressed right away:</p>	5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Acceptable	2 Poor	1 Unacceptable
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Alignment of Instruction	<p>Overall, provide a rating for the alignment of instruction</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%;">5 Excellent</td> <td style="width: 20%;">4 Good</td> <td style="width: 20%;">3 Acceptable</td> <td style="width: 20%;">2 Poor</td> <td style="width: 20%;">1 Unacceptable</td> </tr> </table> <p>Provide one or two key observations made during classroom visits that should be addressed right away:</p>	5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Acceptable	2 Poor	1 Unacceptable
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