
CHAPTER 1

Planning for Instructional Improvement

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Towards a Frame of Reference

The teacher in training and the experienced teacher are faced with a broad choice of alternative teaching practices. Many of the alternatives offer, at best, little more than a change. In some cases the alternative may simply be a faddish step backwards. It is clear that some teaching practices are ineffective—it is important to note that the practice (not the teacher) is ineffective. Teachers can change the impact they have on students through their selection of teaching practices.

One clear message of the research literature discussed in this book is that the teacher is the final arbiter of what happens in the classroom. Teacher supervisors, curriculum committees, and school boards may offer little more than general direction, regardless of assigned or assumed authority within the system. In the final analysis, the teacher determines what is taught and how it is taught.

Given that the teacher exercises considerable latitude over instruction, and that many of the available instructional alternatives are less effective than others, the teacher needs a frame of reference to discriminate among the instructional alternatives. It is the purpose of this book to provide part of that frame of reference.

The practices that the effective teaching literature identifies as having the greatest value are those that describe student learning experiences. For example, it is clear that effective teachers place a strong emphasis on achieving successful guided practice before moving to independent practice. The choice of instructional method is less important than the inclusion of a guided practice component in the teaching sequence. Thus, guided practice might be achieved by large-group instruction, the peer tutoring involved in cooperative learning, or well-integrated computer-assisted instruction.

A frame of reference to guide the selection of effective teaching practices should be practical in that it can be applied to a wide range of substantive daily problems. This frame of reference should be built on a consistent body of research. The effective teaching literature offers a base for an important part of this frame of reference. If the evolutionary pattern present in this body of research holds, future research findings can be expected to add to rather than contradict present knowledge.

“What Am I Doing for Students?”

One of the realities of the classroom is that resources are finite; decisions involve compromises in the allocation of resources, such as the teacher's time. These decisions will be easier if one places the primary emphasis on what happens to the student, deemphasizing some of the other characteristics of competing instructional practices. For example, although highly individualized instructional settings have considerable theoretical appeal to a number of educators, many small- and large-group settings are often very effective learning environments. However, regardless of the setting, situations are effective when teachers facilitate student engagement in learning tasks efficiently and provide rewarding social and personal experiences. The achievement of such student experiences is more important than fidelity to any particular instructional setting.

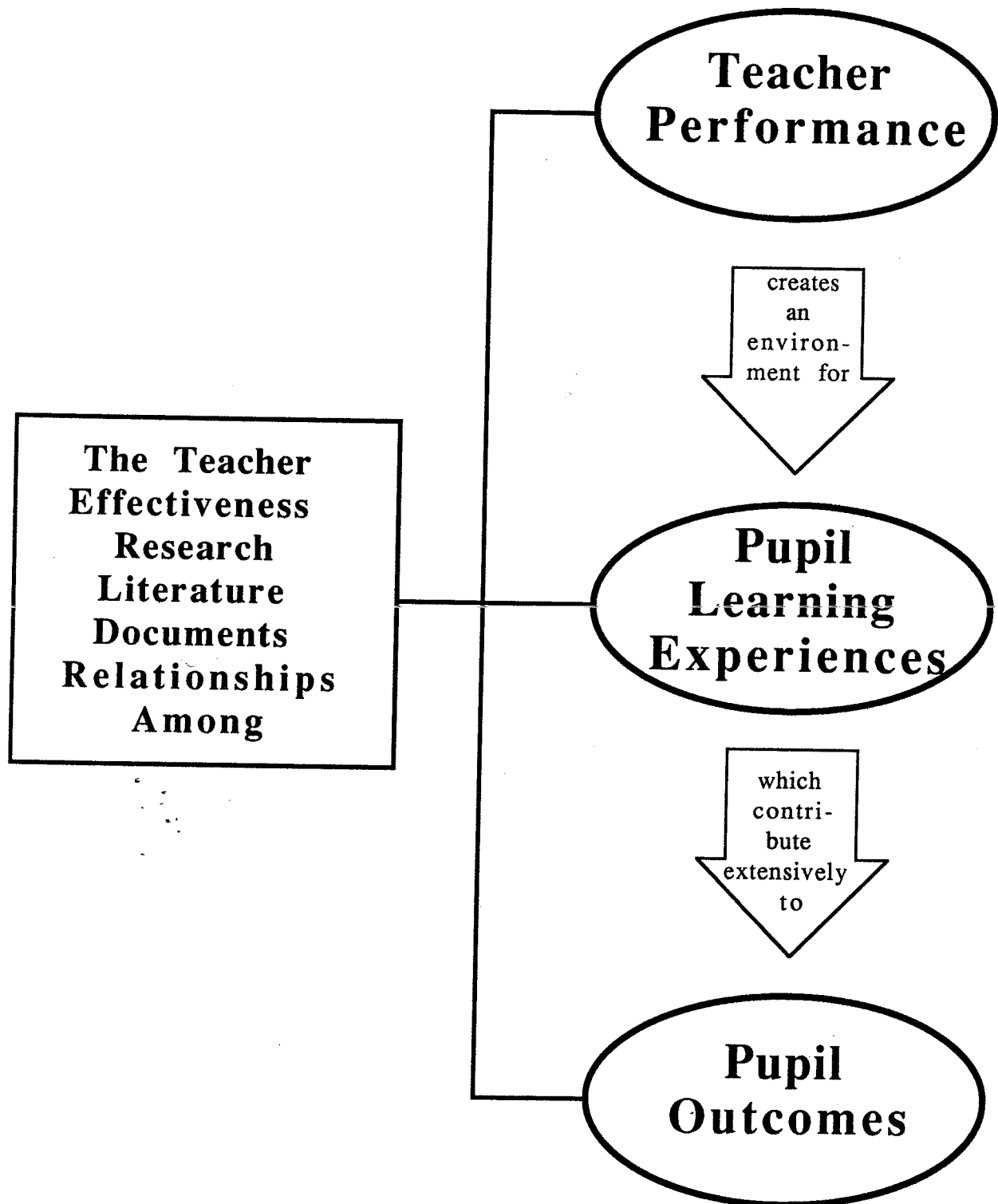
Teachers should never get trapped into trying to select instructional practices on the basis of such characteristics as group or individual instruction. It is necessary to see beyond these more visible trappings of an instructional practice, look to the student, and make decisions based on what happens to the student. Characteristics such as student engagement and student success must be given priority. Much of the research literature on effective teaching practices is based on the direct observation of students; it contains a wealth of information on student behavior as well as teacher behavior.

To some extent, the term *effective teaching literature* is misleading because it suggests a concern for just the relationships between teacher behavior and student outcomes. A more appropriate term might be *effective pupil learning experiences*. Researchers have pointed out that the literature addresses three components: (1) teacher performance, (2) pupil learning experiences, and (3) pupil outcomes (Medley, Soar, & Soar, 1975; Capie & Tobin, 1981). The component of pupil learning experiences is the central unit that links teacher behavior to pupil outcomes (see Figure 1.1).

One way in which the practical value of the effective teaching literature and of this book can be measured will be your ability to evaluate new teaching practices. If you have assimilated the lessons of the research literature, you should know what types of student learning experiences are needed to ensure the effectiveness of a teaching practice. The important question is not “What am I doing?” but “What am I doing to create learning experiences that result in positive student outcomes?”

FIGURE 1.1

The Focus of the Teacher Effectiveness Literature



The Research Literature and the Implications

The past twenty years have seen the development and consolidation of the effective teaching literature. Earlier research findings suggested that the contributions of educators were comparatively ineffective when pitted against community and social forces. Recent analyses of the effective teaching literature affirm the importance of the teacher as a professional who can make a difference.

Most of the instructional skills identified in the effective teaching literature evolved through a two-stage process. The first stage was correlational. In this phase, researchers identified teaching practices that were consistently associated with the more effective teachers. The second stage was a validation stage, in which teachers were systematically trained in promising practices identified in earlier correlational studies. In summarizing one of these second-stage studies, Good, Grouws, and Ebmeier (1983) concluded,

Our research provides compelling evidence that teachers make a difference in student learning and offers some useful information about how more and less effective teachers differ in their behavior and in their effects on student achievement [p. 13].

The effective teaching literature addresses attitudinal attributes, teaching skills, and student learning experiences that are consistently associated with effective teachers. In terms of attitude, the effective teacher is described as an individual confidently approaching teaching tasks with an expectation of success, a belief in the importance of teaching, and a sense of responsibility for the outcomes of the teaching process.

The teaching skills of the effective teacher are characterized by (1) a concern for the use of teacher and student time; (2) an emphasis on the curriculum; (3) the careful introduction of new material in small steps, integrated with guided practice and followed by carefully managed independent practice; (4) the careful monitoring of student progress, with coordinated reteaching; (5) attention to prerequisite skills and frequent reviewing to ensure that new content is successfully introduced and consolidated; and (6) a set of classroom management skills that involve a strong instructional program and active teacher involvement with all students in all phases of the instructional process.

In discussing the relative importance of the characteristics of effective instruction, Reynolds and Lakin (1987) made the following two observations. First, these are variables that can be altered by educators. Second, the value of these characteristics "that are

associated with pupil achievement but that can be manipulated by educators, is greater than those over which educators have relatively little control (e.g., IQ, family background, class size)" (p. 338).

In a similar vein, Hunter (1984) made the following observation on the generalizability and importance of the findings from the effective teaching literature:

Current findings are in direct contrast to the former fatalistic stance that regarded IQ and socioeconomic status as unalterable determinants of academic achievement. Gone also should be the notion that different ages, ethnic derivations, or content to be learned require a completely different set of professional skills, or that effective teachers must be born and can't be made. While the *form* may be different, the *substance* of excellence in teaching remains the same. Discoveries that dispelled these previously held educational myths are not entirely new, but recent translation from theory into teaching practice has effected the metamorphosis from a reactive to a proactive profession of education [p. 169].

The generalizability of the findings is, indeed, one of the most encouraging aspects of the effective teaching literature. Researchers have noted the consistency with which these effective teaching characteristics have been shown to be important in virtually all structured curriculum content areas, across elementary and high schools (Capie & Tobin, 1981; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986), with regular classroom students, with preschool children (Lane & Bergan, 1988), and handicapped students (Bickel & Bickel, 1986; Gottlieb & Alter, 1984), and in Third World countries (Fuller, 1987).

Although the characteristics of effective teaching appear to be common denominators in a wide range of instructional settings, one should not assume that such characteristics make up the total act of teaching. A range of instructional activities can be added. For example, the effective instruction literature does not identify specific procedures for sequencing instruction or exemplifying concepts. Also, the effective teaching literature makes no detailed attempt to answer the question, "What do I teach?" The primary concern is, "How do I teach?"

All the answers may not be available, but what is available is both practical and important. Berliner (1984) stated,

There are many variables recently uncovered in educational research that show as strong or stronger a relationship with student achievement and student behavior as variables in medical practice show to longevity and general health. But in medicine, such relationships become imperatives [for change], while in education they are treated as shreds—the merest glimmer of an implication [for change]. Our research is much less at fault than our attitudes towards research [p 75].

The Purpose of This Book

The central message of the effective instruction literature can be summarized as follows:

1. The effective instruction literature identifies teaching skills and student learning experiences that a teacher can use to increase instructional effectiveness.
2. There are undoubtedly other skills a teacher may add. These skills should be viewed as complements, not replacements, for the effective teaching skills.
3. Teaching skills vary greatly among teachers and are potent factors that teachers can modify so as to have a positive and substantive impact on students.
4. One measure of a professional is the extent to which he or she systematically uses relevant research findings to improve practice. The professional teacher has an obligation to engage in the following activities:
 - a. Review the recommendations from the effective teaching literature
 - b. Compare present classroom practices against the recommendations
 - c. Implement changes
 - d. Evaluate the extent to which the changes are consistent with the effective teaching literature

These four activities summarize the purpose of this book.

How to Use This Book

The different effective teaching variables and their implications for improving instruction are treated in Chapters 2 through 6, as follows:

- Chapter 2: Time Management
- Chapter 3: Teaching Functions
- Chapter 4: Academic Feedback
- Chapter 5: Academic Monitoring
- Chapter 6: Classroom Management

Before publication in its present form, this book evolved through three field-test versions, which were used in both in-service and pre-service settings. The following suggestions for using the book came from observations made during the field-testing of the earlier versions.

Chapters 2 through 6 have similar structures, and each is divided into the following sections:

- A. The Research Literature.** In this section, the skills and concepts associated with the chapter topic are identified and discussed in relation to the research literature and their value as classroom practices.
- B. Knowledge Quiz.** This is a check for understanding of the material presented in Section A. Each Section B consists of a quiz and answers for the quiz.
- C. Self-evaluation Checklist.** This checklist allows teachers and student teachers to examine their present practices and determine the extent to which their classroom practices are consistent with the recommendations that follow from the research on effective teaching practices. In responding to each item on the checklist, the teacher may indicate that classroom practices are partially or wholly consistent, or the teacher might indicate a need to gather more information in that area.
- D. Information Gathering.** This section of each chapter consists of examples and suggestions of ways teachers may gather more objective information about classroom practices.
- E. Practical Suggestions.** In this section of each chapter, practical suggestions for typical problems are provided. These suggestions have been gleaned from numerous sources, including obser-

uations from the field-testing of earlier versions of this book and from the research literature.

F. Self-improvement Plan. Most master teachers did not become so overnight. Years of conscientious observations of the relationship between teacher actions, student experiences, and pupil behavior were used for progressive improvement of instructional practices. Over time, the less effective practices were replaced by more effective ones. This section of each chapter provides suggestions for this process of progressive improvement.

The central intent of the effective teaching research is the facilitation of professional growth through an objective view of history, rather than through a trial-and-error process that places students at considerable risk.

Pre-service and In-service Use of This Book

The book is structured to support both pre-service and in-service staff development activities. In the in-service field-testing of earlier versions, the book served as a guide to school principals and staffs working cooperatively over the whole school year to improve instruction progressively. Typically, planning meetings were held twice a month to discuss progress and plan future activities.

In pre-service settings or other situations in which participants do not have access to classrooms, the book can still make a major contribution. One of the most effective pre-service applications involves the following steps for each of Chapters 2 through 6:

Step 1. Participants review and discuss the material in Section A and then take the Section B knowledge quiz.

Step 2. Participants check their responses to the knowledge quiz and review any material not mastered.

Step 3. The instructor then provides participants with (real or simulated) completed self-evaluation checklists (see Section C). This will be most meaningful if participants can observe a classroom and complete their own checklists.

Step 4. Using these completed self-evaluation checklists, the participants, as individuals or small groups, prepare self-improvement plans (see Section F). The plans include procedures for improving instruction and for gathering more objective information. To develop the plans, the participants use the resources provided in Sections D and E of each chapter.

Step 5. Participants and instructor discuss and evaluate the self-improvement plans.

The First Step in Using This Book

After reading Chapter 1, it is recommended, for both pre- and in-service applications, that you do a quick reading of Section A in each of Chapters 2 through 6 first, then return to Section A in Chapter 2, and proceed through the book in the traditional linear manner. Because the variables treated in the effective teaching literature are complex and interacting, a quick review of all variables will help the reader comprehend the nature of these relationships. This procedure also complements the intent of this chapter and supports one of the recommendations of the effective teaching literature: to clarify the direction of and the reason for the instruction before addressing the acquisition of new content in more detail.

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