



Yr1 Post-Primary Classroom Observation



This document aims to support the observational activities that you will undertake during your first period of School Based Work (SBW). You should engage in additional reading that further illustrates salient issues that are apparent within post-primary schools. It is essential that you read the selected reference material, as this will assist you to think professionally about teaching and learning, while informing you of specific observational activities that provide a basis for analysis of classroom practice.

Note – A range of personal, social, psychological and philosophical issues underlie much classroom activity (Dillon and Maguire, 2004). Consequently, due to the complex nature of the school classroom, the observational themes are not mutually exclusive and considerable overlap occurs. For example, an unproductive classroom climate may result from behavioural issues, availability of resources etc. You may plan to systematically observe one of the themes above, but an incident might occur that is a key component of another theme. Participatory observation will, in addition, highlight a number of themes within the one lesson. What is expected from you is to familiarise yourself with the above themes, through reading of the selected texts, in order that you can identify with them in practice. Failure to engage with the text will result in a limited understanding of the underlying issues associated with school and classroom observation.



1. Classroom Climate/Organisation

The Classroom climate established by the teacher can have a major impact on pupils' motivation and attitudes towards learning. The skills involved in establishing a positive classroom climate are thus of immense importance (Kyriacou 1998). The type of classroom climate generally considered to best facilitate pupil learning is one that is:

- Purposeful
- Task-Orientated
- Relaxed
- Warm and Supportive
- Has a Sense of Order

Such a climate facilitates learning by establishing and maintaining in pupils positive attitudes and motivation towards the lesson – in essence pupils and their learning are of immense importance (Kyriacou 1998). This area is clearly illustrated in **Kyriacou, Essential teaching Skills, Chapter 5**. Also useful is **Capel 2001, task 2.1.4, p.60** this deals with what classrooms look like. Reference to this text highlights that educational researchers have illustrated what a positive classroom climate means, and how it can best be achieved. It will be seen that *pupil motivation is crucial*, that teachers must *build up a good relationship with pupils* and that *pupils' self-esteem is raised through positive support*. Also important is the classroom *appearance* - is it well laid out and tidy? In addition the *teacher's appearance* can be influential – does it fit with school conventions, that is, professional?

See page 78 of Kyriacou *Essential Teaching Skills* and substitute 'I or My' for 'the teacher' when observing a class. Of course during observation of a class you must make professional judgements.

Page 63 of Kyriacou (1998) *Essential Teaching Skills Ch.4* deals very well with structuring the stages and transitions in lessons and asks key questions about lesson management. This can be used as a focus for observing the stages and transitions in a lesson. Also, an excellent analysis of key



classroom teaching qualities and tasks is provided in Kyriacou (1998) *Effective Teaching in Schools*, Ch. 6. This does provide more detail than what you require in year 1 but you should scan the chapter to identify what is said regarding structuring lessons, for example the bottom of **page 79**. *Capel (2001) 5.3 Teaching Styles* also provides an excellent analysis on teacher styles. Look at Capel **page 274** and try to identify the teaching styles of those teachers that you observe (Which one will you be?). In your observations you should address:

What teaching strategies did the teacher adopt, that is, how was the lesson organised?

2. Classroom Communication

Classroom Communication is perhaps one of the most important elements within successful teaching and in attaining a productive classroom environment. Communication is a two-way process involving the mutual exchange of information and ideas. Good communication is essential for developing good relationships with pupils, a positive classroom climate and effective teaching and learning. It can involve communication between pupils, however during your first block of school-based work you should focus on communication between pupils and their teacher. You cannot predict how pupils will respond in class; therefore teachers require a repertoire of communication skills in order to interact appropriately. Communication is a complex process, which can occur in many different ways, for example, **written, verbal and non-verbal**. We are concerned, at this point, with the latter two ways. A teacher's approach to communication is not simply used to convey the content of a subject, but also to create relationships with pupils, which will hopefully make them more interested in learning. During classroom observation we would like you to consider how teachers display the aspects below.



Verbal Communication – this includes aspects such as volume, projection, pitch, speed, tone, clarity and expressiveness.

Non-verbal Communication – this includes, for example, appearance, gesture, posture, facial expression and mannerisms, particularly in relation to how you present yourself as a teacher.

In particular, record the communication methods the teacher uses during distinct time periods within the lesson, for example, to gain the classes attention at the start of a lesson, when they wish to change the direction of pupil activity, when gathering the class for a demonstration or a reading activity.

Does the teacher appear to put feeling into what they say? - Pupils can, at times, respond to *how* something is said by the teacher rather than *what* is said. The language a teacher uses must be accessible, investigate if the teacher uses words or phrases that pupils appear to understand. Are pupils named by the teacher and does the teacher refer to pupils' lives outside of the classroom? During the lesson does the teacher inform the pupils of what they are doing and why? Do teachers recap on key points throughout the lesson?

A Chinese proverb that is applicable to all classroom lessons suggests that those giving instructions should:

- Tell them what you are going to tell them,
- Tell them,
- Then tell them again what you have told them.

During the observed lessons does there appear to be a language for your subject, a particular terminology used that includes key words not used elsewhere? With regard to lesson structure investigate those occasions when teachers are engaged in *explaining* things to pupils. Explaining largely consists of *what*, *why* and *how*, it describes new terms and clarifies their meaning. When watching an explanation make a note of whether the teacher



engages pupils in the learning, uses an analogy or metaphor, mixes information with activities or questions, or relies on a lecture and note taking.

Questioning

Teachers can use as much as 400 questions per day, 30% of their teaching time (Wragg, 1984). Investigate if the teacher uses both:

Closed (Only one correct answer that the pupil either does, or does not know)
Open (Several possible answers of which there may not necessarily be a 'correct' answer).

Does the teacher use a series of questions to probe issues further and promote class debate? Are questions asked to the whole class, specifically targeted individuals, or to groups? What happens to pupils who get the answer wrong?

Teachers should carefully listen to pupils and take account of the response. Being able to **listen effectively** is as important as being able to send the message effectively. It is too easy to ask a question and then 'switch off' or think about the next question, or the next part of the lesson, when an answer is being given. This lack of interest is easily conveyed to the pupil respondent and others in the class.

Wragg (1984, p.116) studied errors in questioning by student teachers and this included *not looking at pupils when asking questions, talking too fast, at the wrong volume or not being clear*. In responding to pupil responses, student teachers often *only accepted answers they either wanted or expected*. Other errors included *pupils not knowing why particular questions were being asked, student teachers not providing sufficient background information, not asking questions in a logical fashion leading to a jumping, disjointed approach and tending to focus on small groups of pupils and ignoring the rest of the class* (teachers can, at times, tend to direct their questions in a V shaped wedge, from the teacher and ignore pupils outside of this).



A positive expression of teacher confidence is crucial in all teaching situations. Non-verbally this can be expressed via *tone of voice, posture, movement* and *eye contact*, both in its own right and as an appropriate accompaniment to verbal language.

Non-verbal communication supports or detracts from verbal communication, for example, a teacher should look stern when disciplining a pupil as laughing and smiling can detract from the desired message. Looking at a pupil for slightly longer than normally expected can indicate your awareness that they are misbehaving. Wragg (1984, p.82) found that it was important that teachers displayed a **caring** manner and children favour teachers who were **'understanding, friendly and firm'**. Investigate and record the forms of non-verbal communication used by teachers.

3. Behaviour Management

Teachers need a wide range of organisational and managerial strategies to maintain the order necessary for students to learn well. Perhaps paradoxically, it can be difficult to learn these tactics while observing a successful teacher in action, as such teachers make the whole process appear so easy (*Dillon and Maguire, 2004*).

'Ask a group of student teachers before their first teaching practice to describe any anxieties they may have, and before long someone will mention discipline or class control. It is the source of greatest unease amongst student teachers' (Wragg, 1991, p.4)

School life, being a mixture of *social* and *academic* experiences, leads to an array of behaviour in the classroom. The following texts deal very well with behaviour management.

- **Brooks, Abbott and Bills (2004) Ch.11 Positive Approaches to Supporting Pupil Behaviour**
- **Capel, Leask and Turner (2001) 3.3 Managing Classroom Behaviour**
- **Kyriacou (1997) Effective Teaching in Schools Ch. 8 Key Dealing with Pupil Misbehaviour**
- **Kyriacou (1998) Essential Teaching Skills Ch.6 Discipline**



Pupil misbehaviour may be regarded as behaviour which interferes with the smooth flow of a lesson. The Elton Report (DES/WO, 1989) reported the following to be the most frequently cited forms of misbehaviour:

Arriving late for the lesson
Not paying attention to the teacher
Pupils being out of their own seats without good reason
Being noisy – both non-verbally and verbally
Excessive talking – talking out of turn
Not getting on with the work
Hindering others

While some pupils may be predisposed to misbehave, the three most common causes of general misbehaviour in the classroom are:

- 1. Boredom**
- 2. Inability to do the work the teacher has set**
- 3. Effort demanded for too long without a break**

Misbehaviour can also be a means of seeking attention. Pupils expect teachers to establish and conform to certain routines. The key skill to managing classrooms is to anticipate problems before they arise. Ground rules must be established to prevent misbehaviour (Obtain a copy of the school and/or subject department rules). In a study of secondary teachers Wragg and Wood (1989) identified eleven classroom rules. In order of occurrence these were:

1. Pupils must not talk when the teacher is talking
2. No disruptive pupil noises
3. Entering and moving around the classroom
4. Interfering with the work of others
5. Completing work in a specified way
6. Raising hand to speak – not shouting out
7. Making a positive effort in work
8. Not challenging a teachers authority
9. Showing respect for property and equipment
10. Rules to do with safety
11. Pupils must ask if they do not understand

Aiming to Prevent Misbehaviour

The following are some suggestions on how misbehaviour can be prevented, try to identify if these are evident in your placement school.



1. You must aim to notice misbehaviour so that you can respond calmly, quickly and effectively, possibly with good humour.
2. Adopting the 'Lighthouse Effect' (Hay McBer Report, 2000) – Having 360-degree vision and being aware of the class.
3. Circulating around the classroom.
4. Changing the pace of a lesson to prevent boredom.
5. Assist pupils who appear to be experiencing difficulty, not doing the work for them, but rather, facilitating them. This may prevent frustration.
6. Apply ground rules – give pupils who misbehave a warning that provides them with the opportunity to avoid sanctions – you allow them not to lose face.
7. If a pupil continues to misbehave apply what you promised e.g. move them - never make idle threats, they will lose their effect and you, your credibility.
8. Express disappointment in having to reprimand, this may cajole the pupil.
9. Avoid anger – this can provide great entertainment for the class.
10. Avoid public confrontation or debate with the pupil, inform them that it will be discussed after the lesson.
11. Do not make unfair comparisons, or insult, criticise a pupil – criticise the behaviour.
12. Direct comment to the work in hand, ask pupil if there is a problem with the work.
13. Difficult as it might be, try to avoid reprimanding a whole class, it can alienate others not misbehaving.
14. Be consistent and fair in your reprimands – pupils possess a finely tuned sense of justice.
15. Punishment should be proportional to the offence committed – don't up the stakes and check school policy on detentions.
16. Be aware of school support systems.
17. **Never physically punish a pupil.**

Behaviour management is an area that you will develop over a number of years and following your SBW placement, your records of observations will be discussed and used to assist others in identifying how behaviour can be appropriately managed. Use the key questions on **Page 101** Kyriacou (1998) *Essential Teaching Skills* to assist with your observation of this area.

4. Assessment of Pupil Activity

Assessment is one of the most important aspects of teaching and can take many forms, from informal observation of a pupil's performance in class – looking over their shoulders, to high stakes 'A' Level examinations. Over the



period of your 4-year degree programme you will investigate the area of assessment in more detail (*In particular **Assessment For Learning***). In essence, assessment is any activity used to appraise pupils' performance. Assessment consists of techniques you can use to monitor pupils' progress in terms of specific learning outcomes. Assessment can serve a number of different purposes (Kyriacou, 1998) and the most frequently used purposes are as follows:

To provide teachers with feedback about pupils progress
To provide pupils with educative feedback
To motivate pupils
To provide a record of progress
To provide a statement of current attainment
To assess pupils' readiness for future learning
To provide evidence of teacher and school effectiveness.

Your task during SBW is to observe and record a variety of assessment methods - Use the key questions on **Page 117** Kyriacou (1998) *Essential Teaching Skills* to assist with your observation of this area. To extend your understanding of assessment you may also wish to make reference to:

- **Brooks, Abbott and Bills (2004) Ch.9 Using Assessment for Formative Purposes (see particularly *fig 9.2 p.120*)**
- **Capel, Leask and Turner (2001) 6.1 Assessment and Accountability**

5. Using Resources to Support Learning

There are a vast range of resources for use in the classroom (see Kyriacou, 1998 *Essential Teaching Skills Page 45*). This theme is related to classroom climate/organisation, in that, some schools are better resourced than others, and this itself may be due to a number of factors beyond the control of the school. Also, it is obvious that practical subjects such as Technology and Design will use more resource material. In this observational activity your task is to record the extent to which a teacher makes use of the resources available to them. You will consider if the lesson was enhanced through employment of resources, or alternatively, could better use be made of what



was available? You should also read **Brooks, Abbott and Bills (2004) Ch.12**
Using ICT to support learning.

6. Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities

- **Pupils involved in Problem Solving**
- **Pupils engaged in Creative activity**
- **Group or paired work**
- **Pupils managing their own time.**

In this observational activity you should comment on the above elements of TS&PC. To support you, reference should be made to the information and readings previously given in this module.