

In the know ...

This is the third part of the report *What Makes Great Teaching*, written by Robert Coe, Cesare Aloisi, Steve Higgins and Lee Elliot Major, published by the Sutton Trust. The focus of this extract is how certain frameworks or tools can help teachers, middle management and senior leadership capture great teaching.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH



“What kinds of frameworks or tools could help us to capture great teaching?”

Assessing teacher quality through multiple measures

A formative teacher evaluation system – based on continuous assessment and feedback rather than a high-stakes test - must incorporate a range of measures from different sources, using a variety of methods. A key to a suitably cautious and critical use of the different methods is to triangulate them against each other. A single source of evidence may suggest the way forward, but only when it is confirmed by another independent source does it start to become a credible guide.

Currently available measures can give useful information, but there is a lot of noise around a weak signal, so we must be careful not to over-interpret. If we were to use the best classroom observation ratings, for example, to identify teachers as ‘above’ or ‘below’ average and compare this to their impact on student learning we would get it right about 60% of the time, compared with the 50% we would get by just tossing a coin. Therefore, these judgements need to be used with considerable caution.

Six approaches to teacher assessment

For this review we focused on three approaches to assessing teachers that demonstrate moderate validity in signalling effectiveness:

- classroom observations by peers, principals or external evaluators
- ‘value-added’ models (assessing gains in student achievement)
- student ratings

Three other approaches had limited evidence:

- principal (or headteacher) judgement
- teacher self-reports
- analysis of classroom artefacts and teacher portfolios

Classroom observations

Successful teacher observations are primarily used as a formative process – framed as a development tool creating reflective and self-directed teacher learners as opposed to a high stakes evaluation or appraisal. However, while observation is effective when undertaken as a collaborative and collegial exercise among peers, the research also emphasises the need for challenge in the process which may involve principals or external experts.

Levels of reliability that are acceptable for low-stakes purposes can be achieved by the use of high-quality observation protocols. These include using observers who have been specifically trained – with ongoing quality assurance, and pooling the results of observations by multiple observers of multiple lessons.

Measuring student gains

Value-added models rely on the availability of good outcome measures. Their results can be quite sensitive to some essentially arbitrary choices about which variables to include and what assumptions underpin the models. Estimates of effectiveness for individual teachers can vary from year to year and class to class. However, at least part of what is captured by value-added estimates does seem to reflect the genuine impact of a teacher on students' learning.

Student ratings

Collecting student ratings should be a cheap and easy source of good feedback about teaching behaviours from a range of observers who can draw on experience of many lessons. There is evidence of the validity of these measures from use both in schools and, more widely, in higher education.

Pauline Ronan