Teachstone®

Delivering on the promise of CLASS®.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS®): Promoting Quality in Early Care and Education Settings across the Country

Context

Each week, 11 million children under the age of five are placed in early care and education settings while their parents work.[1] For the vast majority of these children, the caregiving and early education they receive is of poor to mediocre quality, neither supporting their development nor promoting school readiness. Given these facts, the current quality of our nation's early care and education providers represents a missed opportunity to achieve a host of educational and social goals, including reducing the school readiness gap at kindergarten entry, having students reading at grade level by third grade, and decreasing grade retention in the early grades.[2]

Over the last decade, federal early childhood policy has worked to improve the quality of early care and education. For example, both the 2007 Head Start Act and the 2014 Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) made great strides to improve the early experiences of our nation's youngest children. A key aspect of these laws is a focus on better defining and measuring the quality of early childhood settings through assessments like the Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS®). The Office of Head Start uses CLASS to measure classroom quality as required by the 2007 Head Start Act. CLASS also is being used in more than 23 states as part of quality rating and improvement systems.

The CLASS system has become the preeminent quality assessment in early childhood because it measures what matters most to the well-being and future success of our country's youngest children. Historically, quality has been measured and regulated through "structural" indicators of quality—easily quantifiable aspects of programs, such as class sizes, teacher-to-child ratios, teachers' college degrees, and curriculum.[3] These measures were used despite the lack of evidence that they lead to better outcomes for children. **In contrast, the CLASS system measures the quality of early childhood programs at the "point of impact" for development and learning: the quality of instruction and of interactions between the teachers and the children.** Research has found that the best predictors of later child outcomes are the characteristics of teacher-child interactions as measured by the CLASS system. This fact is true both for children who are monolingual and for children who are dual language learners.[4]

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[1] Lynda Laughlin, Who's Minding the Kids? Child Care Arrangements: Spring 2011, Current Population Reports P70-135 (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2013).

[2] See, for example, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children, http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu (2007).

[3] R. C. Pianta, C. Howes, M. Burchinal, R. Clifford, D. Early, et al., "Features of Pre-Kindergarten Programs, Classrooms, and Teachers: Do They Predict Observed Classroom Quality and Child-Teacher Interactions?" Applied Developmental Science 9, no. 3 (2005): 144-159; L. Justice, B. K. Hamre, and R. C. Pianta, "Quality of Language and Literacy Instruction in Preschool Classrooms Serving At-Risk Pupils," Early Childhood Research Quarterly 23, no. 1 (2008): 51-68.

[4] J. T. Downer, M. L. López, K. Grimm, A. Hamagami, R. C. Pianta, and C. Howes, "Observations of Teacher-Child Interactions in Classrooms Serving Latinos and Dual Language Learners: Applicability of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System in Diverse Settings," Early Childhood Research Quarterly 27, no. 1 (2012): 21-32.

Equally important, the CLASS measure has been combined with proven teacher supports to enhance instruction and interactions. The CLASS scores provide a picture of the quality of interactions in a classroom, but to effect change, that information must be attached to the professional development of teachers. Teachstone Training, LLC, the company that publishes the CLASS measure, has developed evidence-based teacher supports that are individualized based on CLASS scores and include training, coaching, and instructional support strategies.[5]

Given its effectiveness in promoting quality in early childhood settings, the CLASS system and the accompanying supports are currently used broadly in research, program accountability, planning and evaluation, and professional development across the United States.
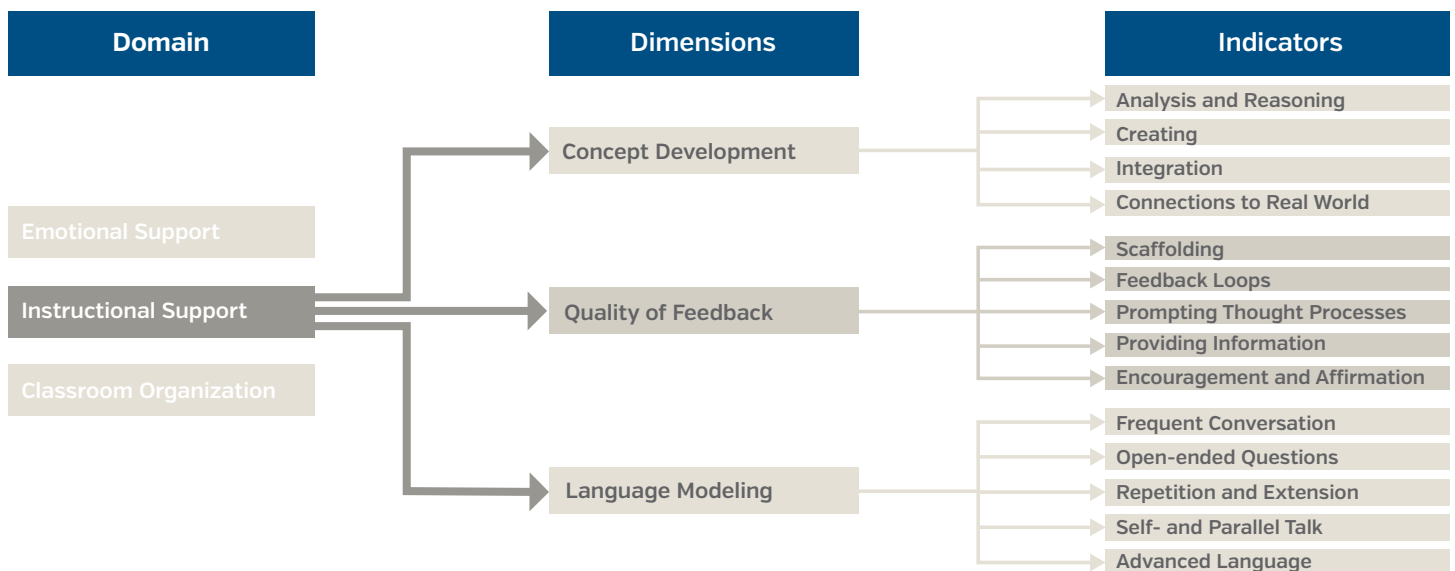
What is the CLASS framework?

The CLASS framework is a reliable and valid classroom assessment tool that measures the teacher-child interactions that promote positive academic and social outcomes for children.[6] It is based on hundreds of studies and provides an objective measure of important, observable teacher behaviors and teacher-student interactions. CLASS scores are not determined by the presence of learning materials, the condition of the physical environment, or the adoption of a specific curriculum. Instead, the focus is on what teachers do with the materials they have and on how the teachers interact with children.

The CLASS framework measures interactions around specific domains of quality. For example, the CLASS tool for teacher-child interactions in 3- and 4-year-old classrooms has three domains:

- Emotional Support

- Instructional Support

- Classroom Organization

These domains are further organized into dimensions, which more specifically define the aspects of quality being measured. Figure 1, showing the Instructional Support domain of the Pre-K CLASS tool, provides an example of the CLASS framework's organizational structure.

Figure 1. Organization of the CLASS framework (Instructional Support on Pre-K CLASS tool)

Domain	Dimensions	Indicators
Emotional Support	Concept Development	Analysis and Reasoning
		Creating
		Integration
		Connections to Real World
Instructional Support	Quality of Feedback	Scaffolding
		Feedback Loops
		Prompting Thought Processes
		Providing Information
		Encouragement and Affirmation
Classroom Organization	Language Modeling	Frequent Conversation
		Open-ended Questions
		Repetition and Extension
		Self- and Parallel Talk
		Advanced Language

[5] C. C. Raver, S. M. Jones, C. P. Li-Grining, M. Metzger, K. M. Champion, and L. Sardin, "Improving Preschool Classroom Processes: Preliminary Findings from a Randomized Trial Implemented in Head Start Settings," Early Childhood Research Quarterly 23, no. 1 (2008): 10-26.

[6] K. LaParo, R. C. Pianta, and M. Stuhlman, "Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS): Findings from the Pre-K Year," Elementary School Journal 104, no. 5 (2004): 409-426.

To obtain a CLASS score, a Certified CLASS Observer observes a classroom for 15 to 20 minutes. During this time, the observer focuses on the interactions between teachers and students, as well as the interactions among students themselves. At the end of the observation period, the observer derives numerical ratings for each of the dimensions. After assigning ratings, the observer begins a new CLASS cycle. Data is recorded either on a paper score sheet or online using a data management system.

Supporting Continuity and Connection between the Early Childhood and K-12 Systems

While initially developed for use in pre-K classrooms, the CLASS system has been expanded for use in classrooms from birth through secondary education. In order to capture the most important teaching practices and interactions for different ages and grade levels, the CLASS system currently has six versions, each tailored to measure the key aspects of quality for children of a certain age and grade range. Across all age levels, the six CLASS tools capture the consistent elements of teachers' interactive behavior and define dimensions that measure the teachers' emotional support for learning, their interactions fostering classroom organization, and their interactions providing instructional support.

When the full system is used, CLASS creates a common language and common expectations for education professionals in settings from birth through secondary education. This consistency allows the professionals to improve interactions with students even as they move across age and grade levels. This also provides administrators with a common evidence-based metric by which they can evaluate teacher effectiveness. By providing a common way to describe and observe effective interactions, the CLASS system bridges grade-to-grade transitions and increases consistency and coherence to better understand effective teaching, while still providing a context-specific and developmentally responsive measure for each age group.

Conclusion

The CLASS system works to ensure that every child has access to teachers who offer warm, responsive, and cognitively stimulating classroom experiences. From the research, it is clear that interactions matter more than a teacher's college de-gree, a teacher's length of experience, or the types of materials in the classroom. Teacher-child interactions drive learning outcomes, and the CLASS system provides a cost-effective, scalable way to measure the interactions that promote strong educational results.