

CHAPTER

3

BIAS IN CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Classroom observation research is a powerful method employed in educational studies to delve into the dynamics of teaching and learning environments (O’Leary, 2020). This method involves systematically watching, documenting, and analysing the interactions, behaviours, and activities that unfold inside classrooms. By immersing researchers in the natural context of educational settings, classroom observations offer invaluable information about teaching practices, instructional strategies, and student engagement. This research method captures the intricacies of the educational experience, whether it employs structured approaches with predefined criteria or unstructured methods that allow for a more holistic understanding. Ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality, play a pivotal role in maintaining the integrity of the research. According to O’Leary (2020), classroom observation research contributes significantly to the improvement of teaching methodologies, informs educational policies, and fosters a more profound understanding of the factors influencing effective learning outcomes.

Pine (2009) stated that classroom observation research allows researchers to capture the subtleties of teacher-student interactions,

uncovering patterns and nuances that may not be apparent through other research methods. By immersing themselves in the educational setting, researchers can identify effective instructional techniques, assess the level of student participation, and understand the factors influencing the learning environment. The versatility of this method accommodates various educational contexts, from primary schools to higher education institutions, making it adaptable to different age groups and subjects. Additionally, the use of technology, such as audio or video recording, complements observational data, providing a comprehensive understanding of classroom dynamics. Overall, classroom observation research stands as a cornerstone in educational research, facilitating continuous improvement in teaching practises and contributing to the ongoing dialogue on enhancing the quality of education.

Different types of observations, such as formal, informal, and peer observations, cater to various needs within the educational context. Formal observations are pre-planned and tied to specific goals, while informal observations offer unexpected perspectives on everyday teaching practices. Peer observations facilitate a collaborative learning environment, allowing teachers to watch and learn from their colleagues.

Despite the benefits, challenges exist in the classroom observation process, such as the potential for bias, the need for standardisation in observation protocols, and the impact of the observer-teacher relationship on the overall experience. Classroom observation, like any human-based assessment method, is susceptible to bias. Bias can arise from various sources and may impact the objectivity and fairness of the evaluation process. However, when conducted systematically and with a commitment to professional growth, classroom observation emerges as a valuable tool in the pursuit of educational excellence and the continuous enhancement of teaching and learning environments.

In line with this, this chapter is a rapid review that defines the types of bias in classroom observation research, discusses its implications for research, and suggests techniques to manage them.

3.2 TYPES OF BIAS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Bias in classroom observation research refers to systematic deviations from objectivity that can distort the accuracy, fairness, and reliability of data collected during classroom observations. Given that observation fundamentally involves human interpretation, various forms of bias can infiltrate the process, whether through the lens of the observer, the design of the instrument, or the implementation of procedures. Each type of bias presents distinct challenges that can compromise the validity of findings, misguide pedagogical interventions, and affect decisions related to teacher development and educational policy. This section explores the different types of bias commonly encountered in classroom observation, namely observer bias, instrument bias, and procedure bias, while unpacking their implications for research integrity and instructional quality.

3.3 OBSERVER BIAS

Observer bias is a phenomenon that can significantly impact the accuracy and fairness of assessments, particularly in contexts like classroom observation. This bias occurs when the observer's personal beliefs, expectations, or preconceived notions influence their interpretation and judgment, leading to subjective and potentially inaccurate evaluations (Zaare, 2013). Understanding and addressing observer bias is key to guaranteeing the reliability and validity of assessments in various fields, especially research. Consider the following example of observer bias in a classroom observation study:

Dr Sarah, an experienced educational researcher, embarked on a study to investigate teaching methods and their impact on student engagement. To gather data, she employed a team of trained observers who were tasked with observing and documenting classroom dynamics.

One observer, Dr Jane, possessed a strong background in progressive teaching methods and was an advocate for student-centred learning. As Dr Jane entered a classroom to watch a lesson on traditional lecture-style