

Teacher-to-Student Interactions

Psychologists have found that there’s a “magic ratio” of positive to negative interactions between two people in order for them to have a healthy relationship, one characterized by psychological safety. This ratio is 5 to 1—five positive interactions for every negative interaction (neutral interactions can exist as well, but most important is the ratio of positive to negative interactions). This research holds true in the classroom as well. For kids to learn, they must feel emotionally safe with their peers and their teacher. Psychological safety can be evaluated in how a teacher interacts with individual students and the whole class on a moment to moment basis.

Exhibit 12.1: Teacher-to-Student Interaction Tracker is an example of a tool that I created and use often to gather data on the relational dynamic between a teacher and students (you can download a blank one from my website, brightmorningteam.com). As you might gather, the challenge is that *positive* and *negative* are subjective categories and we can feel judged if someone determines that something we say or do is positive or negative. That said, it’s a really powerful tool that yields invaluable data.

EXHIBIT 12.1 TEACHER-TO-STUDENT INTERACTION TRACKING TOOL

Teacher Mr. G	Subject/Period Science/5 th		Date and Time May 11, 2016 12:37-1:00				
Total Number of Students: 24	Number of Male Students: 8 Racial Breakdown: African American: 3 Latino - 4 Asian - 1			Number of Female Students: 16 Racial Breakdown: African American: 3 Latina - 12 Asian - 1			
Interaction	Time	Positive*	Negative*	Neutral	Gender	Ethnicity	Notes
1	12:37			X	F	AA	Whatever’s in your mouth, just get rid of it
2	12:38			X	F	L	B, you’re going home
3	12:39	X			F	L	Bye. Have a great weekend
4	12:39	X			M	AA	Thank you, have a seat
5	12:40			X	M	AA	Pass the papers
6	12:41			X	F	L	Put pencil down, J
7	12:42			X	F	AA	5, 4, 3, 2, 1 (redirect)

8	12:45	X			F	AA	G, go ahead
9	12:46			X	F	AA	Yes, ok
10	12:47	X			M	A	Please read, D
11	12:48			X	M	AA	Come in quickly, please
12	12:48	X			F	AA	Go ahead, S. Excellent
13	12:48	X			F	AA	D, thank you
14	12:49			X	M	AA	Into back table, please
15	12:49			X	M	A	D, yes?
16	12:50			X	M	AA	Please, keep going
17	12:50		X?		F	AA	D - (redirect—"if that happens again you're going to go in the book")
18	12:51			X	M	AA	L, do you have a question?
19	12:52	X			F	AA	Yes, please, G
20	12:52	X			F	AA	Good suggestion
21	12:52	X			F	L	Please, ask your question
22	12:53	X			M	A	Yes, D, yes
23	12:53			X	F	AA	Yes, S
24	12:54			X	F	AA	Yes, D
25	12:55			X	M	AA	L?
26	12:55		X?		F	AA	G (redirect)
28	12:57			X	F	AA	G, attention here
29	12:59	X			F	AA	Excellent, D
TOTAL		11	2	16	F: 18 M: 11	L: 4 AA: 21 A: 4	

* Interactions can be classified as "positive" or "negative" based on the specific words, the tone of voice as well as pitch and pace and volume, and any non-verbal communication that accompanies the interaction.

This is one situation in which you don't want to reveal to your client in advance that you're going to categorize their interactions with students as positive or negative, as that will likely skew the data. So, here's the process I use when I want to gather this data:

1. First, I say: "Thank you for inviting me to observe your classroom. I'd like to look at the dynamics and I have a tool I use to gather that data. I'll come in a few times, and then afterwards I'll share what I learned and show you the tool. in your room and it'll take me three to five observations to use them all. Afterwards, I'll share what I've learned with you and show you the tools and data. Would that be okay?"
2. Use the tracking tool three to five times, for fifteen to twenty minutes each time.

3. Analyze the data yourself before sharing it with the client so that you can see trends and patterns and so that you can prepare for the debrief conversation.
4. When you share the data with the client, invite them to sort it into categories of “positive” and “negative” themselves—to see if there’s a discrepancy between how you see things.

This tool has the greatest impact when it’s used with a client who trusts you. Don’t use it in the first few weeks of working with a new client, or if you feel that trust is fragile.

Although this is ideal in a live observation, you can also use this tool when watching a video of a teacher.