![Making Sense of SCIENCE logo]

Prioritizing High-Quality Interactions in Education

Educational systems are packed with interactions. Teachers, counselors, and administrators interact with each other, students, and families. Students interact with their classmates and across grades. Staff and administrators interact with professional learning providers. We also interact with books, hands-on supplies, classroom furniture, school facilities, and technology (e.g., computers, phones, applications). Some of these interactions transform the lives, learning, and growth of the people involved. Others are insignificant or even detrimental. Figuring out which types of interactions really matter and how to make sure those happen is part of the art of teaching and of leading.

The U.S. Department of Education's Region 8 Comprehensive Center published a brief about remote literacy instruction early in the COVID-19 pandemic, recommending educators provide frequent, high-quality *relational, instructional,* and *learning interactions.*[11] We have always prioritized these types during our in-person work and found that continuing to do so in our remote work was essential.

Relational Interactions

Humans are social creatures, and thus it's no surprise that *relational interactions* form the foundation of teaching and learning. Even the so-called "anti-social" among us typically deeply value a small set of close friends or family. This need doesn't evaporate just because we are in an educational setting. In fact, in educational settings, where people are expected to grow, positive relationships are even more important. We rarely learn from people we don't trust, and we don't trust people just because we know a few things about them. We come to trust people when they show us their humanity, when we show them ours ,and they are respectful with it.

Educators who see learners as the most valuable asset in the classroom and who see their goal as leveraging the expertise and innovation of their learners are often able to develop trusting relationships with their learners, while educators who center their classrooms around themselves, their lessons, and their ability to ensure compliance with traditional behavioral norms rarely do.

High quality relational interactions are formed and maintained among the community of learners, educators, and families . They are not limited to educators building individual relationships with each of their learners. Additionally, rather than compartmentalize relational interactions into specific blocks of time or into
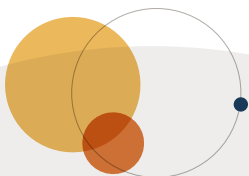
non-academic activities, it is better to weave them into the fabric of the school's teaching and learning. If relational interactions are not seen as essential and integrated into the perceived "real" work of schools (i.e., teaching and learning), people can interpret the focus on relationship development as one more strategy to boost learning versus an authentic acknowledgment of the human element of teaching and learning.

Instructional Interactions

Without positive relationships at the foundation, even the most well-designed instructional interactions will be stifled by the lack of trust among learners. The most common *instructional interactions* in education are between learners and a facilitator/teacher/expert, for example, when teachers are teaching, when experts are presenting, and when facilitators are supporting collaboration. However, instructional interactions can also occur between a learner and their peers, when a learner is acting as teacher, expert, or facilitator, and between families and learners when family members fill those roles.

While there are plenty of instructional interactions that happen in education systems, too often the instructional interactions are of low quality. For example, content delivery (e.g., reading texts, listening to lectures, watching webinars) is a very common and essential instructional interaction, but it is not a high-quality instructional interaction and is often overutilized.

High-quality instructional interactions provide learners opportunities for creating and processing content, applying and integrating new ideas, and reflecting on the content and the learning process. High-quality instructional interactions also typically foster collaboration among learners, learner agency, and learner engagement. Without high-quality instructional interactions, the high-quality learning interactions that schools and communities desire will remain elusive.

Learning Interactions

The term *learning* is often used to describe what we assume students are doing in educational settings. In this framework, *learning interactions* refer to the interactions that occur among learners as they complete instructional activities, and among caregivers and their children as they work to complete assigned homework or make connections between school and out-of-school time.

For learning interactions to be of high quality, instructional activities must be of high quality and learners must have relationships with one another that are characterized by mutual care, trust, and responsiveness. In this way, high-quality learning interactions are in some ways products of high-quality relational interactions and high-quality instructional interactions.

---

[1] Region 8 Comprehensive Center. (July 2020). *Evidence-based Literacy Instruction within Remote Learning Environments.* Prepared for the Ohio Department of Education. Ann Arbor, MI. Lead Author: Sarah Sayko, Ed.D.