

# SYRIA EDUCATION PROGRAMME



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## Syria Education Programme Time on-task Study

MARCH 2021

## Disclaimer

This document has been redacted to protect the individuals involved in the Syria Education Programme. All names of people and locations have either been altered or removed, as has any information that may identify people or locations.

## Project Description

The Syria Education Programme (SEP), also known as Manahel, provides access to safe, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities. Across its lifecycle the project will reach half a million primary-school-age children in Syria.

SEP enables teachers, school staff, and education sector leadership to deliver quality education. In response to the ever-changing landscape of conflict and crisis in Syria, SEP invests in and applies research to respond to the educational, psychological, and protection needs of Syria's children.

From the specialised requirements of disabled children to the psychological demands of childhood within conflict, students' needs are as diverse as they are urgent. SEP takes a broad and nuanced approach to the myriad needs of individual children and groups. By broadening educational access, promoting a safe and secure environment, and creating quality learning opportunities, SEP strives to meet children's holistic needs at scale.



The Syria Education Programme is funded by UK aid from the UK government.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

INEE - Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

TPD - Teacher professional development



# Executive Summary

Manahel wants to understand the amount of in-class time students spend on learning activities to see where there might be room for improvement. We observed 94 lessons using the Stallings Classroom Snapshot to see how teachers were using classroom time. We found that teachers spent 89% of their time on instructional activities and 11% on classroom management or off-task. Around 79% of instructional time was spent on active instruction, such as demonstration, reading out loud, and Q&A. The remaining 21% was spent on passive instruction such as group work and individual work. There is no recommended ratio for active-to-passive instruction as it depends on the subject, learning objectives, and the context of the classroom. However, 79:21 is a high ratio – particularly for earlier grades, where play-based learning is crucial. Reducing ‘chalk and talk’ in classes with the youngest learners is a priority.

Manahel has invested in a structured pedagogy approach to improve the quality of teaching. This includes structured lesson plans, recorded model lessons, learning circles and coaching activities to promote more group work. Coaches have reported a shift to more passive instruction activities; teachers need to be given time (and frequent encouragement) to try more group work and individual work activities and for those activities to become a central feature in their lesson plans. We will repeat the Classroom Snapshot at half-yearly intervals to track any shift in the active to passive teaching ratio.

Assessing the different types of group work and individual work is also important. Copying-based activities were common in classrooms. In response, we need to promote more cognitively-demanding individual activities. Our structured lesson plans include examples of such activities.

Some schools have better time on-task and active-to-passive ratios than others. We can work with these schools when developing model lessons and peer sharing activities with other schools.

Teachers typically start instruction quickly and have usually finished the lesson’s initial input 14 minutes into the lesson. There is room for improvement in starting lessons more quickly and tightening the initial input. Strategies to help do this will feature in our professional development programme. Teachers are using a good variety of activities in their lessons and we will continue to promote a variety of activities through teacher professional development.

There are some areas for improvement and further investigation regarding the classroom environment. For example, most classrooms did not feature student work on the walls. Additionally, some classes appeared to have a shortage of writing materials or workbooks.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Boost the amount of time teachers spend on **group or individual work** through our structured pedagogy approaches.
2. Introduce a **checklist** for teachers with key **features of a good lesson** so they can self-assess their plans.
3. Conduct **professional development on questioning skills**.
4. Introduce **strategies to start a lesson quickly and structured plenary ideas**.
5. Develop a **learning walk tool** for lead teachers to use with other teachers, to observe teacher practice at the start and end of lessons for improvements.



# Introduction

A high-quality lesson observation will tell you if a teacher is teaching well and if all learners are learning well. However, it is difficult to record this information. Quality learning depends on many factors, which vary from lesson to lesson. The Stallings Classroom Snapshot lesson observation focuses on one crucial aspect of education: the amount of time learners are in class and involved in learning activities. It can be conducted by observers with relatively little training and has good inter-rater reliability.<sup>1</sup>

‘Stallings’, as it is colloquially known, is used to observe a cohort of teachers over time. It helps us identify how teachers are using their instructional time and where they can improve. It shows how effectively they are keeping students engaged and how much time they are spending on classroom management. Stallings also tells us what teaching activities they are using and which teaching and learning materials. However, it does not provide an indication of the quality of the teaching more generally. Other forms of lesson observations are being used by Manahel to do that.

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, October 2017, “The Stallings classroom observation system,” <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/sief-trust-fund/brief/the-stallings-classroom-snapshot>

# Methodology

This is the first classroom snapshot undertaken for this project. We aim to repeat them on a half-yearly basis. Between 12-22 December 2020 we completed 94 surveys at 16 schools. Lessons were watched by one single observer using the Stallings tool and each teacher was observed for one lesson.

## Stallings Classroom Snapshot

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Every four minutes during the lesson, the observer looked around the classroom for 15 seconds and noted what was happening in the classroom, considering four areas:

1. What is the teacher doing?
2. What material is the teacher using for the activity?
3. How many students are engaged in the activity with the teacher?
4. Any qualitative observations

The activities were grouped as:

- a. Active instruction
- b. Passive instruction
- c. Classroom management
- d. Teacher off-task
- e. Student off-task

### a. Active Instruction

Active instruction includes activities where the teacher is directly involved with students in one of the activities listed below. Active instruction can also occur among students when they are interacting with each other in activities such as projects. Activities include:

1. Reading out loud
2. Demonstration / lecture
3. Question and answer / discussion
4. Practice and drilling

### b. Passive Instruction

Passive instruction activities are those where the teacher may be monitoring (for example, moving around the room and looking over shoulders), but the teacher is not directly involved as the students undertake their seatwork or copying. Importantly, passive instruction does not mean the teacher or the students are off task – indeed, **some of the best active learning can occur during passive instruction.** Activities include:

1. Copying
2. Assignment / classwork

### c. Classroom management includes:

1. Classroom management alone
2. Classroom management with students
3. Discipline

**d. Teacher off-task** includes:

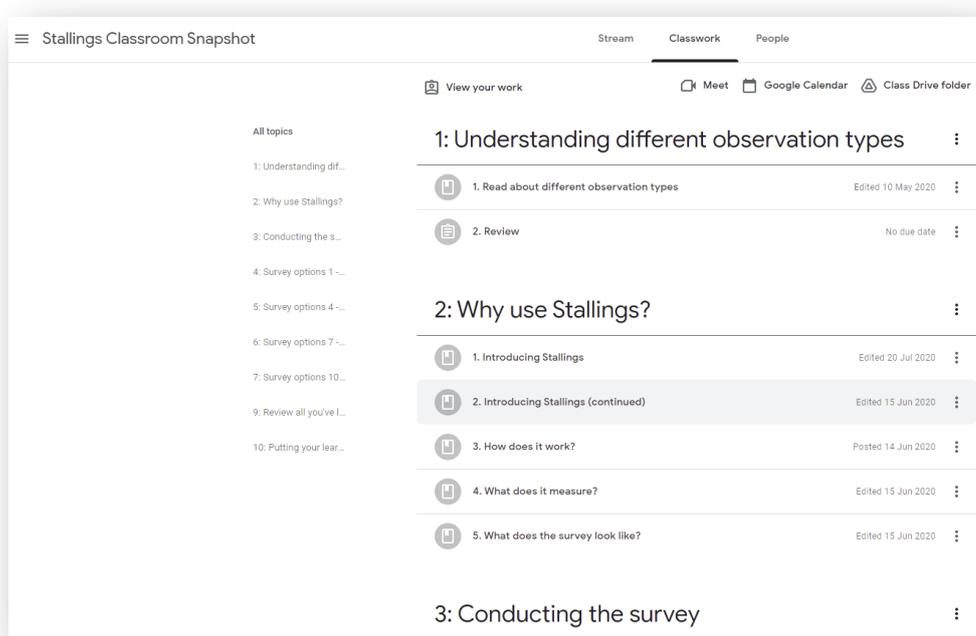
1. Social interaction between teacher and students
2. Social interaction with another adult
3. Teacher not involved
4. Teacher out of classroom

**e. Student off-task** includes:

1. Discipline
2. Social interactions with other students
3. Not engaged

## Enumerator Training

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Enumerators completed a combination of online and offline training to help them understand how to code what was happening in the classroom. They watched videos online and practiced coding them, receiving feedback if they coded incorrectly. The image above is from the English version of the training; the enumerators' version was in Arabic.

# Findings and Analysis

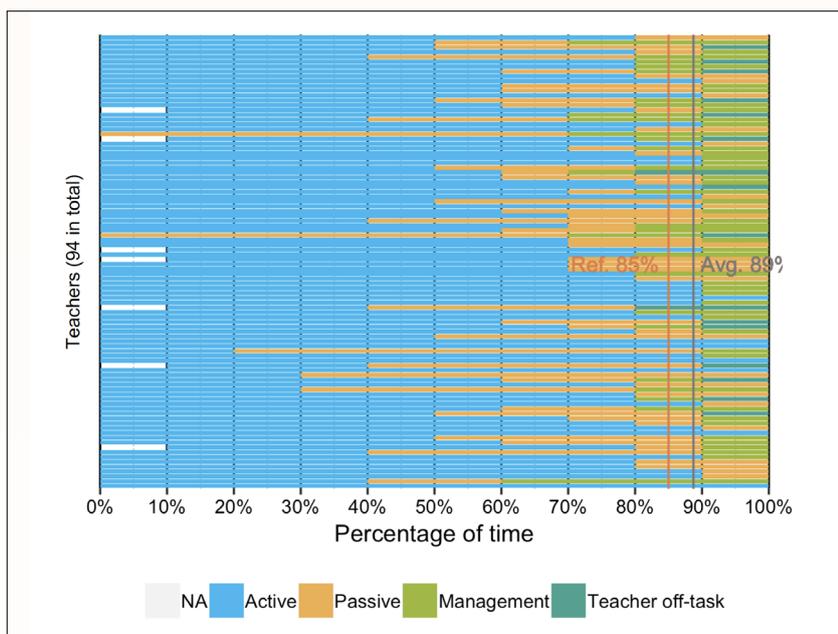
## Teaching Activities

The orange vertical lines in the charts below are reference lines for the time spent on learning activities (both active and passive instruction time). They are set at 85%, as this is the target amount of time spent on teaching in a US classroom according to Stallings and Knight (2003). The grey vertical lines show the average percentage of instruction time for each chart.

### TEACHING ACTIVITIES BY TEACHER

*What percentage of time do teachers spend on different activity types?*

Figure 1.



## SUMMARY

The average time spent on instruction was 89%, 4% above the reference line. The instruction time was above the reference for 62 out of 94 teachers (66%). The lowest instructional time was 60%. The average ratio of active to passive teaching was 79:21.

## ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

These are baseline results which will help us to determine target values. The amount of time spent on instruction, active or passive, is high – relatively little time is spent on management or with the teacher off task. This is a positive finding.

Most of the time was spent on active instruction like demonstration, reading out loud, and Q&A. More time should be given to passive instruction like group and individual work. There is no recommended ratio for active-to-passive instruction – it depends on many factors, such as the subject, the learning objectives, and classroom management considerations. However, 79:21 is a high ratio, with far more teacher-led work than student-led learning. Our aim is to support teachers in moving towards a 50:50 ratio in teaching activities.

To achieve this, we will share recordings of model lessons, based on structured lesson plans. We will also ask teachers to provide their own lesson plans and samples of recorded lessons. We have aligned model lesson plans with the curriculum, so that they are relevant to the subject being taught each week. We have included different activities in the body of the plan to encourage teachers to establish routines for group and individual work. We have already started encouraging teachers to engage in more passive instruction. For example, in March 2021, Manahel delivered two webinars on group work. These are recorded for those teachers who might have missed them or who wish to review the materials at any time.

Manahel has developed a structured pedagogy approach to improve the quality of teaching and promote more child-led learning.<sup>2</sup> We have seen some improvement in the amount of instructional time as measured by self-reports from teachers against the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Competency Framework and lesson observations from instructors/lead teachers. The competencies we have focused on for professional development include:

- Use of classroom environment to promote interaction
- Use of clear expectations and routines to engage students
- Use of a variety of engaging strategies such as peer work, working in pairs, group work, reading out loud, songs, and play-based activities

The nature of modules for numeracy and literacy requires teachers to focus on students' interaction with each other, independent work, individual support, and questions and answers. Manahel provides lesson plans for teachers to use, which include a range of interactive activities.

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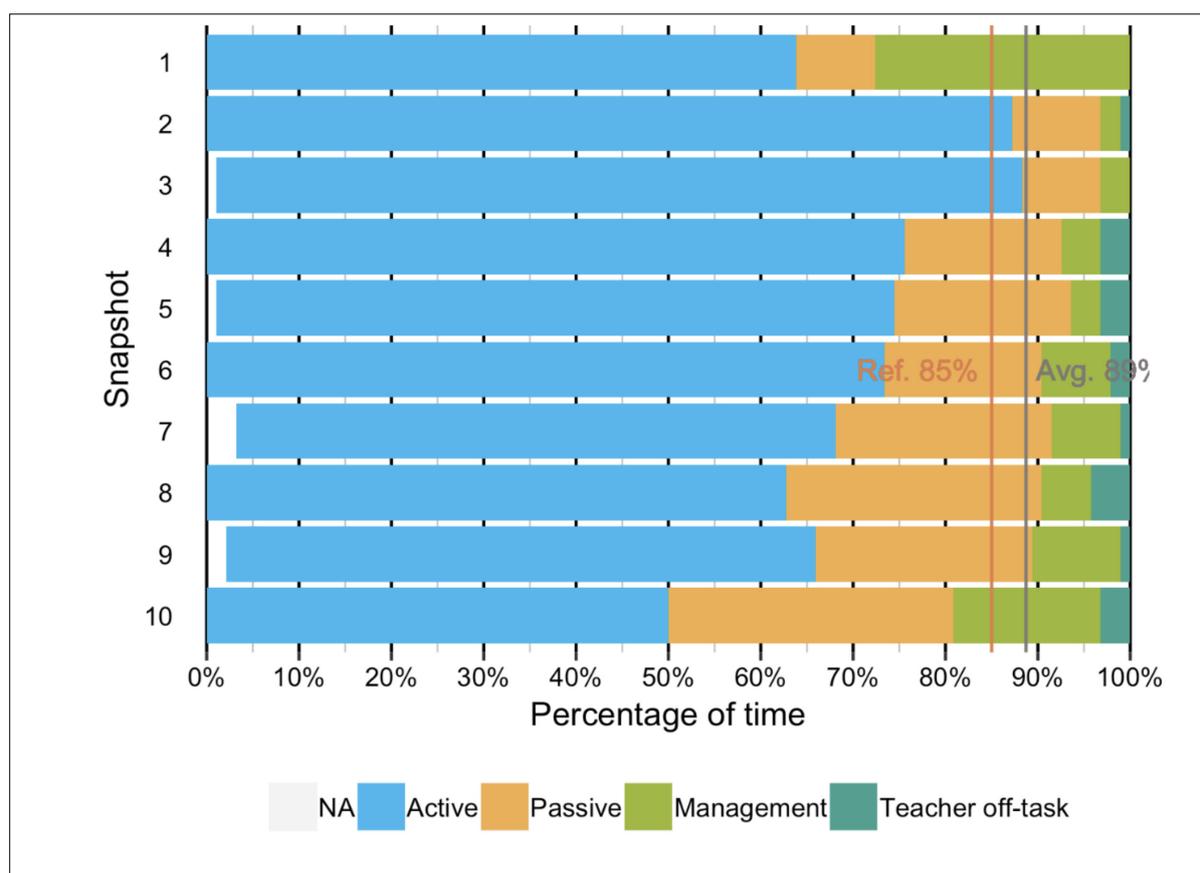
<sup>2</sup>RTI (2021) Structured Pedagogy: How-To Guides and Literature Review notes that the elements of a structured pedagogical approach vary from project to project, but that they typically include the following (all are applicable in Manahel's case): '1) student books and materials, typically at a 1:1 ratio, 2) teachers' guides that provide daily lesson plans for teachers at various levels of specificity, 3) teacher training organised to reinforce specific skills in teaching the lessons, and 4) ongoing support to teachers implementing the structured pedagogy program, typically including coaching and or communities of practice.'

Despite all these activities, teacher-led work continues to dominate. We are working against an ingrained cultural perception that the role of a teacher is to impart knowledge, rather than to be a facilitator of learning. Coaches have reported signs of a shift occurring and we believe that by continuing the approaches above we will continue to see that shift.

Between now and the next snapshot, in addition to providing teachers with scripted model lesson plans and targeted lesson observations, we will ask coaches to identify what would help their teachers make the shift most effectively. For inexperienced teachers or those lacking confidence, this could include making use of our model lesson plans, to help structure interaction. It could also include use of peer teaching, with a more experienced teacher scaffolding a more interactive lesson. Or it might mean asking teachers to commit to times and activities in their lesson plans. Lead teachers will also conduct short learning walks (5-10 minutes) at specific times of the lesson to encourage teachers to incorporate the ideas/learning received in the learning circles. Each week lead teachers will only observe the first five minutes of the lesson to see how teachers are making use of the introduction.

### What are teachers doing most often during each snapshot of a lesson?

Figure 2.



### SUMMARY

During Snapshot 1, four minutes into the lesson, active instruction was observed in 64% of cases, passive instruction in 9%, and classroom management in 28%.

## ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

Lessons in northwest Syria have a typical structure: a short input by the teacher, followed by individual or group work, followed by a plenary, which includes a check for understanding.<sup>3</sup> There are many variations of this, and we cover the advantages and disadvantages of variations in our teacher professional development (TPD). Still, based on this structure, we would be looking for:

- Teachers to start instruction quickly, by the first snapshot – minimising time lost to classroom management;
- More active instruction for the initial input – not lasting beyond the third snapshot;
- More passive instruction in subsequent snapshots (recognising that a teacher will often lead more active instruction with groups or the whole class at points);
- Return to more active instruction in the ninth and tenth snapshots, to review what has been learnt and check for understanding.

The chart above suggests that most teachers are starting lessons relatively quickly. We can see more of a shift to passive teaching at around the 12-minute mark, though as previously noted, the amount of passive teaching is relatively low. Classroom management increases over time, likely due to students growing restless as the class progresses. Our hypothesis is that this is because of the significant amount of active teaching, which can lead students to be more passive, lose concentration and slip in their behaviour. Other than this significant issue, the shape of lessons seems broadly appropriate.

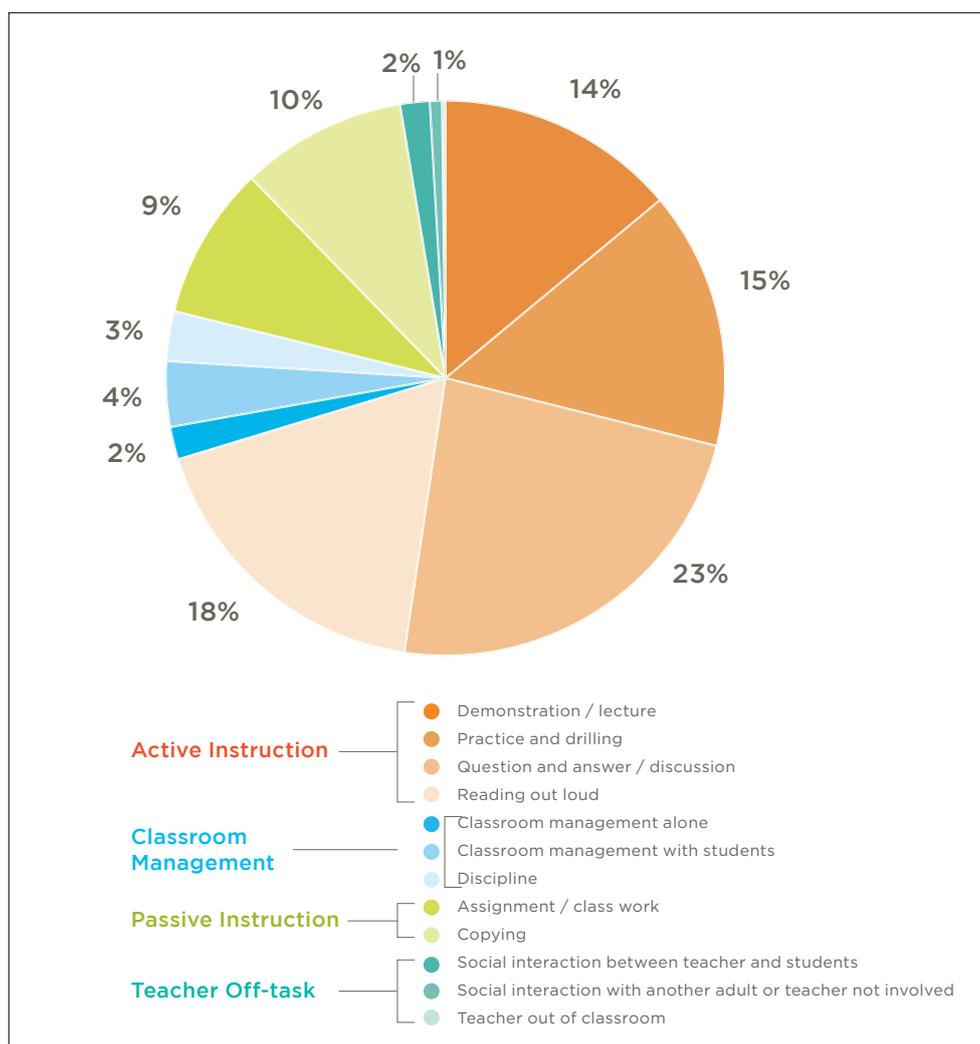
Students do not change classrooms between lessons. Therefore, teachers often use the few minutes toward the end of a lesson as a transition, and sometimes a break, to the next lesson. This could explain the higher amount of time on class management in the final snapshot.

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<sup>3</sup> We want to stress that this reflects a typical pre-Manahel lesson format, not our pedagogical position regarding the structure of all good lessons.

## What is the frequency of the different teaching activities?

Figure 3.



## SUMMARY

The above chart shows the overall frequency of the individual teaching activities, grouping them according to active instruction, passive instruction, classroom management and social interaction. The classroom management / teacher off-task labels are expanded on below the chart

Category	Activity	Activity (Count A)
▼ Active instruction	Demonstration / lecture	131
	Practice and drilling	141
	Question and answer / discussion	220
	Reading out loud	168
<b>Active instruction Total</b>		<b>660</b>
▼ Classroom management	Classroom management alone	18
	Classroom management with students	36
	Discipline	27
<b>Classroom management Total</b>		<b>81</b>
▼ Passive instruction	Assignment / class work	84
	Copying	90
<b>Passive instruction Total</b>		<b>174</b>
▼ Teacher off-task	Social interaction between teacher and students	16
	Social interaction with another adult or teacher not involved	7
	Teacher out of classroom	2
<b>Teacher off-task Total</b>		<b>25</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>940</b>

## ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

We again note that this is an average – the time spent on different activities will vary by teacher, and for each teacher, it will vary by the type of lesson they are teaching.

Half of the passive instruction time was taken up by copying. This is coded when students are copying from the board or when the teacher is dictating. While useful, this activity is not considered to be the most interactive way of teaching and therefore not the best way to promote learning.

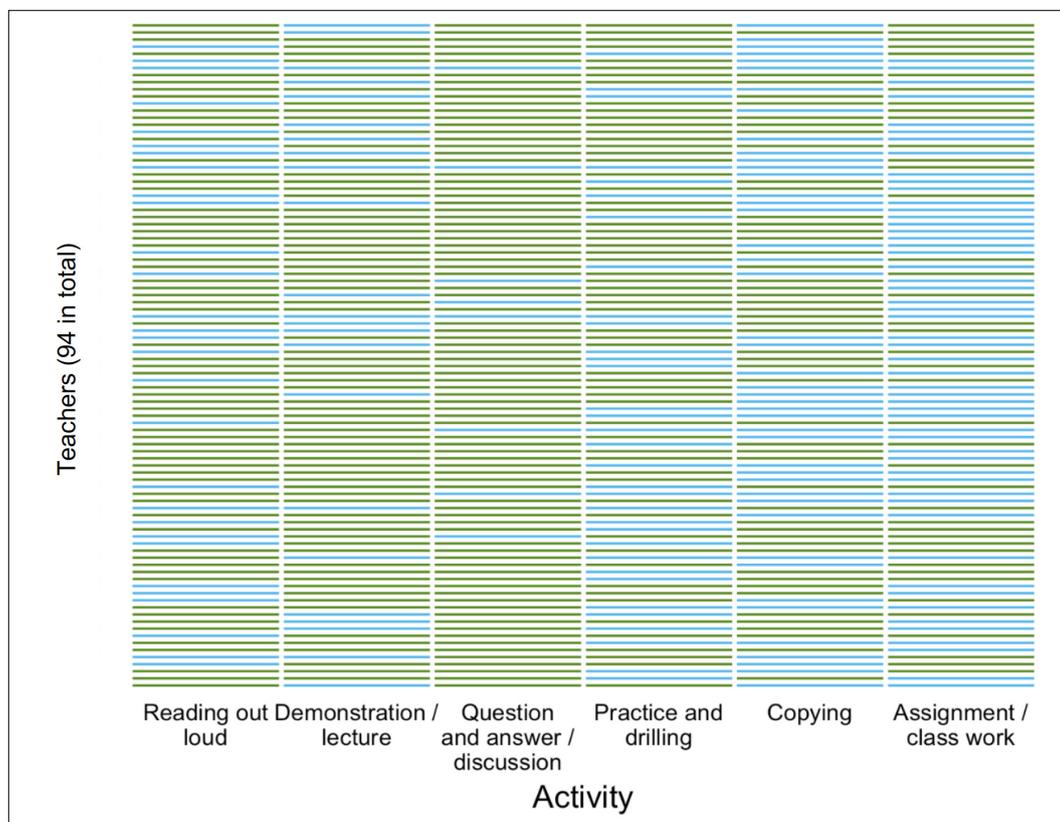
The activities suggested in the section above (page 8) could help promote more interactive learning. The time spent on copying in a literacy lesson requires further follow up to understand how copying is contributing to students' learning. In contrast, in numeracy lessons, students are expected to practice writing mathematical problems and signs.

Reading out loud typically takes up nearly a fifth of a lesson. If done well, it can be a positive way to promote literacy. However, teachers need to ensure students feel supported and comfortable making mistakes, and should ensure that reading sessions are not too long, as students may lose their concentration. We aim to provide guidance for assessing reading out loud, and to adapt the observation form to capture this data. We suspect that in most cases it is the high performers who are asked to read. We are addressing this through TPD.

While we do want to increase the amount of passive instruction, if teachers are more comfortable with active teaching, it also makes sense to increase the amount of active learning that goes on during that time. We will run a TPD session on effective questioning skills that promote higher-order thinking, engage the class equitably, and improve interaction (like think-pair-share). Similarly, we will have a session on effective drilling – with a discussion on which competencies it might be useful for developing (and which it might not) and on play-based activities, that keep such repetition fun and interactive.

## Are teachers carrying out a diverse set of activities?

Figure 4. (zoom in to view detail)



### SUMMARY

Each green cell in the above chart indicates that the specific teacher carried out the corresponding activity. For example, teachers one, two, and three used reading out loud (the three green stripes in the top left); teacher four did not (the blue stripe below those). The detail in this chart requires you to zoom in, but it is the overall picture that is important – it gives you a sense of which activities are most prominent (which columns are most green) but also where there are gaps (blue) and what activities were taking class time in their place.

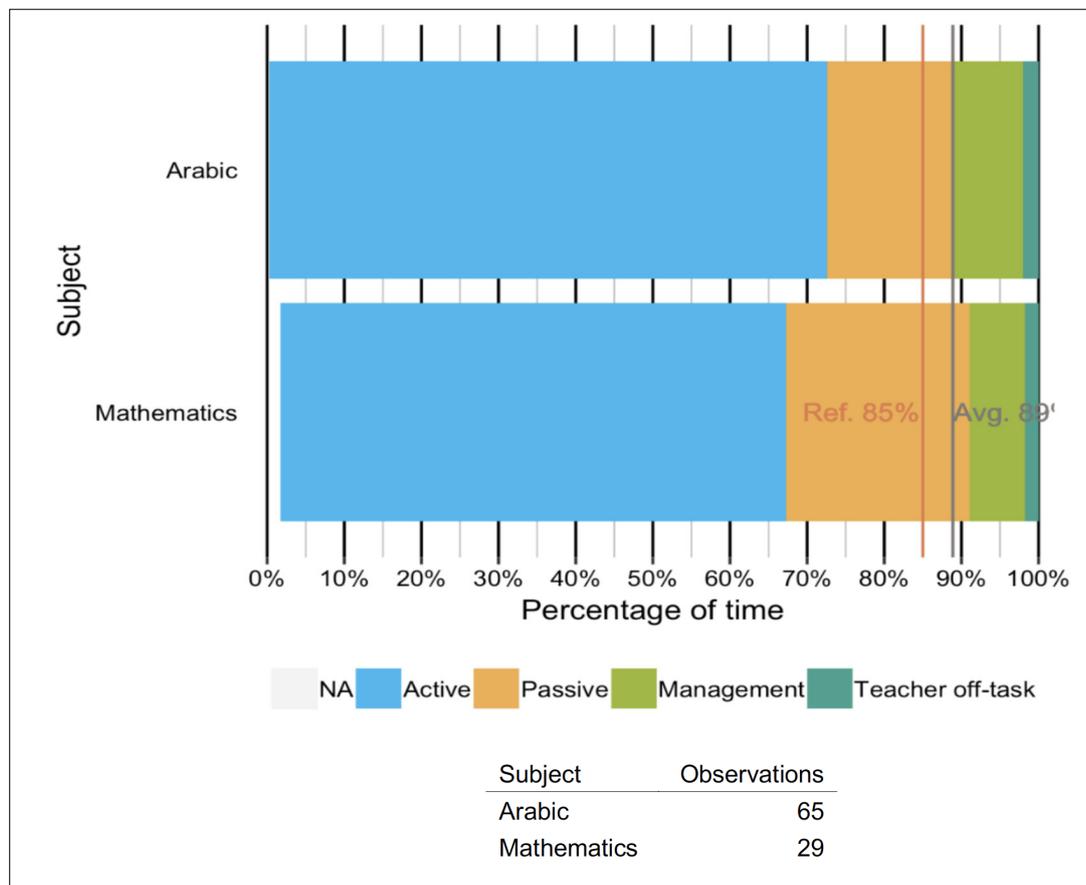
Out of 94 teachers, 65 used reading out loud in their lessons and 71 used demonstration/lecturing during their lessons. As previously noted, we observed less use of activities that involve passive teaching (but active learning): the columns to the right of the chart have more blue stripes, indicating fewer teachers used these activities.

### ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

Most teachers are using a range of different types of activities in their lessons, which is positive. Coaches should promote some specific assignment/classwork activities for teachers to try. We can adapt the Stallings tool to help identify specific activities. Coaches should use professional development circles, the Facebook group (which now includes 5,300 teachers) and WhatsApp groups to share examples of different activities taken from Manahel's model lessons. Teachers are also encouraged to share samples of good lesson plans and recorded sections of activities that worked well.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES BY SUBJECT

Figure 5.



### SUMMARY

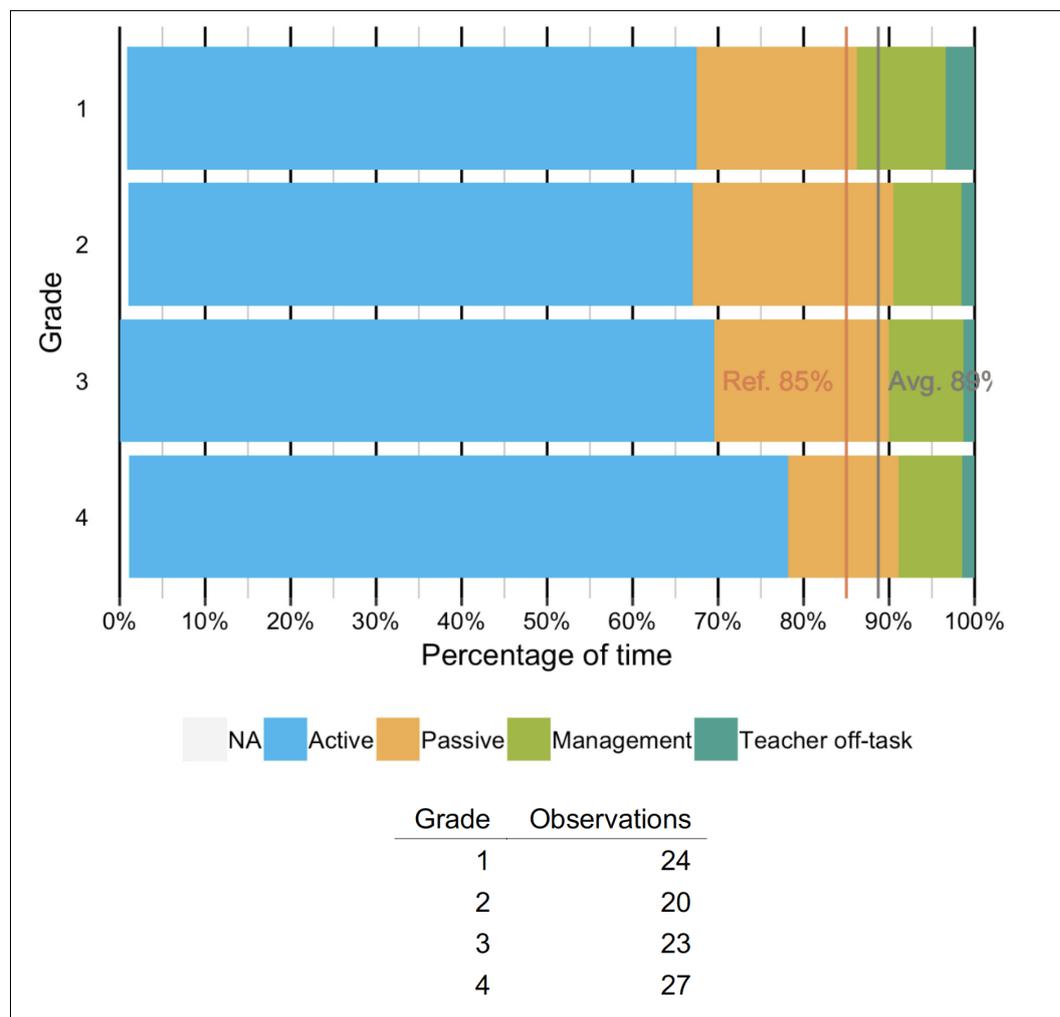
The average time for instruction (active & passive) was 88% for Arabic and 89% for mathematics. Just over 20% was spent on passive instruction for mathematics, and just under 20% for Arabic.

### ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

We observed that maths lessons are typically more interactive. Students spend more time practicing the competencies the teacher has introduced and answering questions from their textbooks than when undertaking reading tasks. To address this, the new literacy modules have more interactive and play-based activities that require students to engage with a wider range of skills (writing, prediction, matching, inference, and speaking with their peers). Arabic teachers appear to spend more time lecturing and modelling compared with mathematics teachers. We are using learning circles to introduce quick fixes to increase group work. This includes sharing lesson starter ideas: engaging and interactive activities to ensure lessons start quickly, recap previous learning and prime students for the lesson's learning objectives.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES BY GRADE

Figure 6.



### SUMMARY

The least instructional time observed was 85% (Grade 1) and the most was 90% (Grades 3 and 4).

### ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

As expected, a little more classroom management is needed with younger children. Management time overall looks reasonable. We would like to see more child-led learning, including play-based learning. Although we particularly want to promote this in the earlier grades, it is appropriate in all grades. 'As UNICEF/the Lego Foundation puts it:

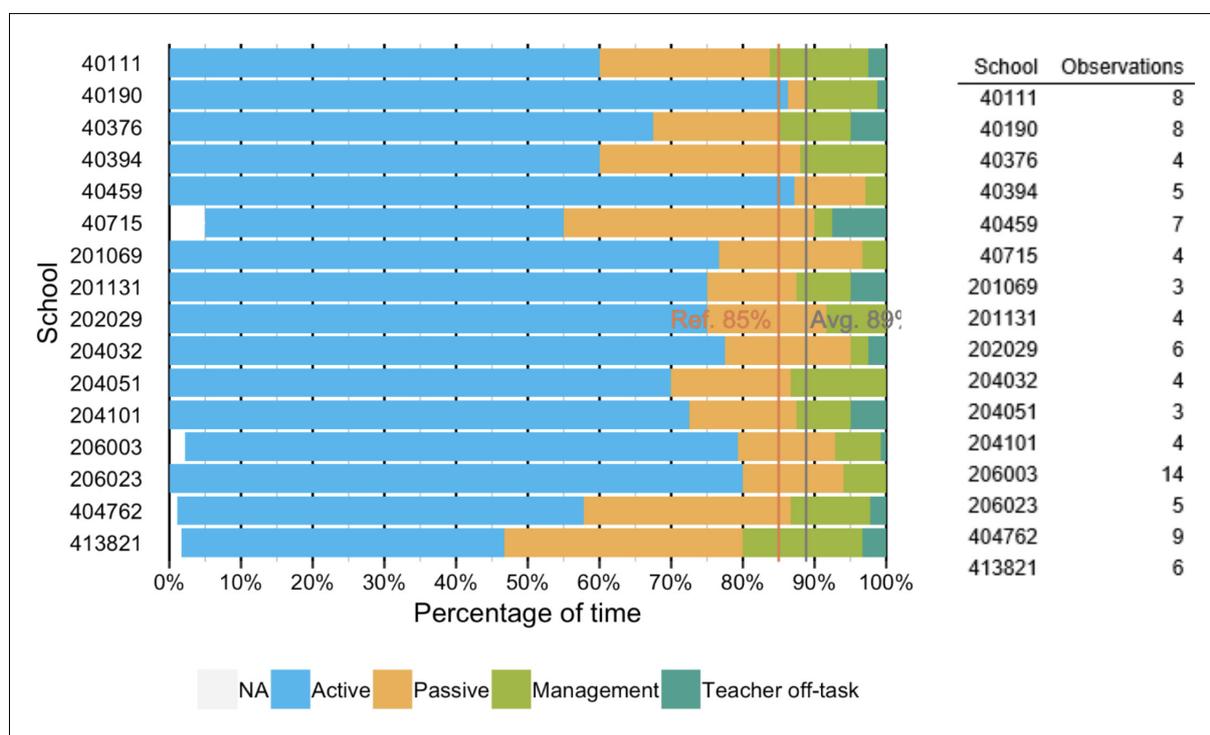
“ Learning through play is not only for pre-schoolers. In the primary grades, play opportunities enhance children’s mastery of academic concepts and builds motivation to learn.<sup>1</sup> ”

<sup>4</sup> [UNICEF 2018 Learning through Play](#)

We will encourage more passive teaching (or more accurately, more active learning) in all Grades, but for Grades 1 and 2 we will particularly focus on play-based activities. For example, we will trial the use of learning stations, where children can work in a small group to solve a task before moving on to the next station.<sup>4</sup> This works particularly well when stations have the same activities from lesson to lesson, but with different content. For example, guided reading on one station; silent reading on another; a group letter-matching activity on a third; and individual-word letter shape/writing practice on a fourth. This allows the teacher to move around the room and see how individuals are doing, chunks concentration demands for an activity into reasonable amounts of time, and promotes small-group work to maximise interaction.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES BY SCHOOL

Figure 7.



### SUMMARY

The split of active-to-passive time varies considerably between schools. The schools with the most passive time were often the ones with the fewest observations.

### ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

Coaches and instructors should discuss whether particular schools and teachers could be role models for others, to encourage more student-led work and more active learning activities. School 404762 looks like a promising starting point. Schools with particularly high active teaching (40190 and 40459) should be prioritised when conducting school visits for TPD on this subject.

<sup>5</sup>[Schwitzer 2018 The Use of Learning Stations](#). Note: A review of the abstract took place in order to highlight the key features. Moving forward a more practitioner orientated resource will be used with teachers.

## Student Materials and Activities

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### STUDENT MATERIALS OVERALL

#### Students work on wall

Work on Wall	Frequency
Yes	37%
No	63%

#### Proportion of students with workbook (1:1)

Proportion	Frequency
Entire class	49%
More than half	36%
Less than half	10%
NA	5%

#### Proportion of Students with Writing Material

Proportion	Frequency
Entire class	51%
More than half	35%
Less than half	14%

### ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

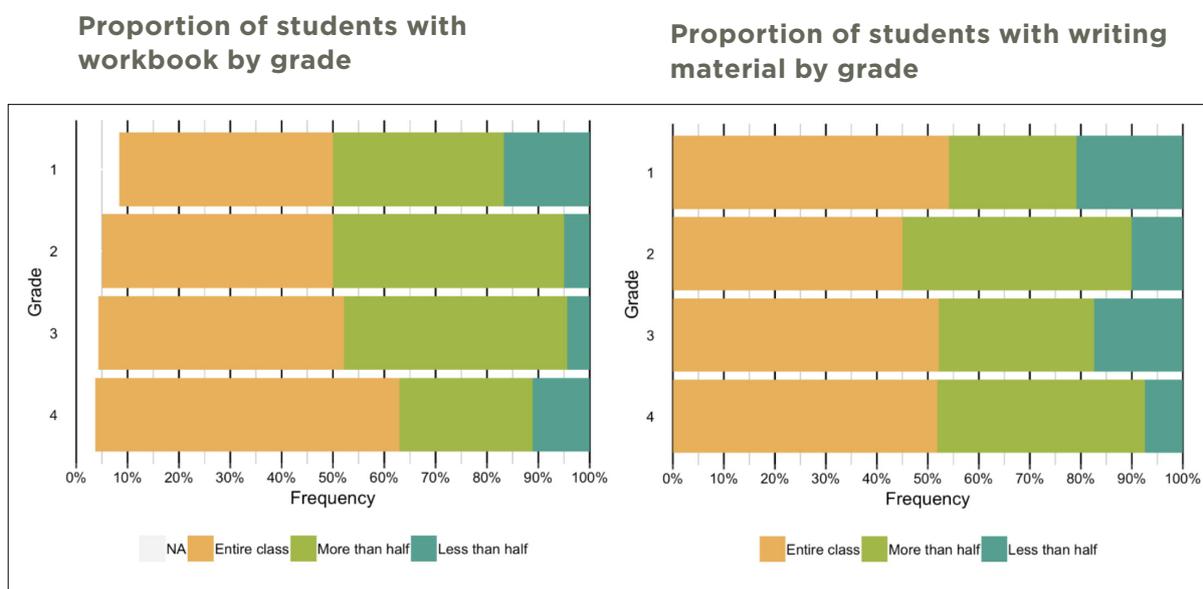
- A minority of classrooms had student displays. Having students work on walls can improve motivation, memory, and contribute to creating a print-rich environment.<sup>5</sup> We will include a TPD session on effective classroom displays.
- We will follow up to understand if there is a shortage of writing materials or workbooks. If this is not the case, we will examine whether enumerators miscoded responses relating to these items.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.edutopia.org/article/dos-and-donts-classroom-decorations>

## STUDENT MATERIALS BY GRADE

Figure 8.



### SUMMARY

In grade 4:

- The entire class had workbooks in 59% of classes
- More than half of the class had workbooks in 26% of classes
- Fewer than half of the class had workbooks in 11% of classes
- The entire class had writing materials in 52% of classes
- More than half of the class had writing materials in 41% of classes
- Fewer than half had writing materials in 7% of classes

(For this chart, 'NA' means a workbook was not required for the lesson.)

### ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

While workbooks were not required in all lessons – potentially leading to some confusion with the coding – almost all lessons would have required writing materials. The findings in Figure 8 are therefore concerning and we are making it our priority to look into them. This does not necessarily mean there is a need to provide students with learning materials, given other surveys on resources indicated sufficient availability.

## Qualitative Findings

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### SUMMARY

Enumerators made notes on observations they considered salient, and which were not captured by the quantitative snapshots. These were mostly related to classroom management issues. Occasionally, they provided insights into the context and how it might have impacted attendance. For example, “the school is a tented gathering within a random camp, the land is very rough, and due to the heavy rain, most of the children did not attend”. In another case, they made notes on cross-curricular learning (using soap to help with counting and linking it to a related conversation on the importance of good hygiene during COVID-19).

### ANALYSIS AND ACTIONS

The observations did not provide particularly useful qualifications or extensions to the quantitative findings. We should experiment with using the snapshots as an opportunity to capture more information, such as:

- Engagement of girls vs. boys (noting that most classes are single-sex, even in the early grades)
- Evidence that children know the learning objectives of a session, and evidence of those objectives being met
- Evidence of differentiation and inclusion of all learners (e.g., who gets called to read during whole class reading episodes)



# Conclusions and Recommendations

Each subsection in the findings above includes actions to improve teaching and learning in Manahel-supported classrooms. We recognise that there are a number of time pressures on teachers and coaches. As such, we need to prioritise the most important changes and not expect teachers/coaches to implement all the changes.

We have therefore prioritised the following actions to be included in Manahel's forthcoming annual workplan and to be reviewed during the planning process. We have started actioning some already, such as running TPD sessions on group work and increasing the number of structured lesson plans we provide.

Manahel will:

1. Encourage teacher learning circles to explore the amount of **time spent on group or individual work** in their lesson plans and compare the structured lesson plans for literacy and numeracy. Based on this, peers in learning circles will set achievable targets for time spent on passive teaching (active learning). Learning circles will be used to share ideas on how to keep most learners engaged through group and individual work so teachers can support a smaller group at points during a lesson. This includes introducing the use of stations to help structure group working.
2. Introduce a **checklist** for teachers with **features of a good lesson plan** (including suggested time spent on introduction and plenary) that they can use to self-assess their lesson plans. Structured lesson plans provide a scaffold for teachers. As teachers build their competence in planning, the scaffold can be removed.
3. Implement **professional development on questioning skills**. This includes assessing the nature of the question (low vs. high order thinking skills) and how to pose questions in an equitable manner – with a gender balance and inclusion of lower and higher-attaining learners.

4. Introduce **tactics to start a lesson quickly**, reducing the time spent off-task or on classroom management at the beginning of the lesson. This can be done by having clear routines led by children for the beginning of the lesson and by having exciting, interactive warm-up sessions.
5. Introduce **structured plenary ideas** to reduce the off-task time during the last 10 minutes of the lesson. These will not only allow teachers to recap the lesson objectives and set homework, but also assess student learning, by using peer-to-peer assessment.
6. Develop a **learning walk tool** for lead teachers to use with teachers, to observe classrooms at the beginning and the end of classes.

## Disclaimer

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