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How often have we said, “Teachers teach the way they were taught?” The typical learner was presented with lecture, mass practice/homework, review and test. Through K-12 education and even into college, this teacher-centered approach is the model most experienced. It is not surprising, therefore, that we teach in the same way.

With the advent of more rigorous state standards, however, this pedagogy is unlikely to result in the levels of student achievement needed to be competitive in the 21st century. Learner-centered strategies that move students through levels of learning such as acquisition of new knowledge and skills, higher level thinking and ultimately to transfer of learning to novel and authentic applications are essential as teachers make the shift to the rigorous PA Core Literacy Standards.

Despite the need for increased rigor in today’s classrooms, the vast majority of instruction is focused on introducing new concepts, rather than deepening understanding of concepts. In a study of classroom observations, Learning Sciences Marzano Center (2014) found that although “36% of lessons focused on helping students practice and deepen new knowledge, less than 6% of observed lessons were devoted to the highest level of cognitively complex tasks.” Almost half of all instruction observed reflected traditional teacher-centered strategies, such as lecture, practice, and review. In such models, the teachers are responsible for most of the thinking and students typically remain passive and compliant. “Instruction focused on achieving rigor is rare. The lack of such instruction amounts to a crisis if we expect students to meet the standards that have been put in place for them” (Marzano & Toth, 2014, p. 15).

How do we support teachers as they make these shifts in their practice? Learning Sciences International, through the Marzano Center outlines the components of the “Essentials for Achieving Rigor Model” of professional development. This model includes high-quality-teacher training, integrated monitoring tools (to monitor shifts in practice), parallel training for teacher-coaches, and student feedback components (to monitor the impact of instructional changes). The need to build teacher capacity supports the critical role of the instructional coach. Guiding teachers to facilitate complex learning by engaging students in cognitively complex tasks and then reflecting on lesson outcomes is a primary goal of an instructional coach. This type of support is not a quick fix; it takes time, often one classroom at a time. “Studies show that effective professional development programs require anywhere from 50 to 80 hours of instruction, practice, and coaching before teachers arrive at mastery” (French, 1997; Banilower,

2002; Yoon et al., 2007, cited in Gulamhussein, 2013).

As Carol Ann Tomlinson writes, “What if a big part of most professional development was mentoring teachers in doing reflective teaching? What if we guided teachers in crafting questions about teaching and supported them in finding insights and trying out classroom changes?” (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 91). Enter the instructional coach!

References:

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Tomlinson, C A. (2014) Classroom-Based Professional Learning. *Educational Leadership* 71(8), 90-91.

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