



bridges to learning

research. practice. results.

Bridges to Learning connects educators with knowledge and research that shows every student can learn when provided cognitively challenging instructional opportunities, and learning environments can flourish when collaboration is valued, voice is honored, and agency is realized.

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COACHING CORNER



A district's perspective: CFC and differentiation

Dena Zook-Howell
IFL ELA fellow

Coaching, at its best, bolsters district goals while supporting individual needs, gracefully weaving coherence and differentiation into a tapestry of continuous learning. With Content-Focused Coaching® (CFC), both the culture and the instruction are positioned to evolve in ever-increasing complexity through the interdependence of people—coaches supporting teachers through individual conferring and teachers supporting one another during PLCs that are truly collaborative pursuits.

We asked one of our district partners, Guilford Public Schools (GPS), to provide their perspective on the CFC model in literacy through the lens of differentiation. GPS and the IFL have been in partnership for almost 10 years, and we continue to learn from one another.

Anne Keene, associate superintendent and coordinator of coaches, notes that the learning stance inherent in CFC that negates the deficit concept and embraces coaching for all means “everyone needs a coach, another set of eyes, and a partner for co-accountability...how I question, how I plan, how I reflect—If I’m co-accountable, I will continue to refine my craft. This is the strongest benefit of CFC: a think partner who assists in the growing of my [individual] understanding.” This

one-on-one relationship allows a coach to ensure that the time spent with each teacher is productive and meaningful for that teacher.

Dr. Keene further states that the PLCs that connect individual conferring with district goals speak to the balance between alignment of district message, shift in culture, and space for differentiation. “PLCs are real learning experiences,” Dr. Keene explains. “Coaches calibrate what is happening and share research and professional literature, classroom resources, and video clips,” including information about student learning trends within a unit. She says that teachers rely on the coaches for this level of support and guidance. Meaningful differentiation that speaks to problem solving is important. “No one is skipping chapters or units—this addresses equity across classrooms, and it creates the opportunity to learn for all children.”

The structures, themselves, provide a vehicle for thoughtful consideration of differentiation. But the intentional choices a coach makes within these structures speak to how well the coach knows the learning trajectories of her colleagues, her ability to match those to coaching offerings, and the opportunities for teacher agency that exist as part of the collaboration.

Lindsay Fiorentino, literacy coach at A. W. Cox Elementary, offers a

concrete example of such differentiation in action. “During the *Ocean Animal Life* unit this year, the support given to each teacher to implement the same new unit was varied. Teacher A was new to the grade level, so she met with me weekly to review lessons, student work, and plan but only engaged in a few select cycles. Teacher B engaged in weekly cycles, wanting me to be a part of the classroom community in a co-teaching capacity. Teacher C identified early on where [in the unit] she anticipated needing support (text structures, note taking) and did cycles then as needed and emailed questions for clarification.”

Meghan Ferrara, literacy coach at Calvin Leete Elementary, provides this perspective on differentiating in her coaching practice. “I have come to approach coaching cycles in a differentiated manner specific to the artifacts being examined. For example, based on the pedagogical goal set by the teacher as well as the comfort level of the teacher, there are multiple ways to examine teacher and student evidence in post-conferences as a means for reflection. Recently, I have been able to examine teacher and student moves sitting side by side with a teacher reflecting on a video segment of a lesson taught by the teacher. In another coaching partnership, we have been combining analysis of student work samples as well as the teacher-student moves from a transcript that was generated by the coach while the teacher was implementing the planned lesson. Using varied artifacts to ground the discussion has been powerful, differentiated cycle work.”

Teacher agency and differentiation are related, as Annine Crystal, literacy coach at Abraham Baldwin Middle School, reminds us. “Each teacher comes to their classroom with a unique set of prior experiences, knowledge, and beliefs that must be taken into consideration throughout their coaching work. Teachers must set goals for themselves

continues on page 7

levels of language acquisition represented in the room.

6. Be willing to accept imperfect language from students as they learn to master English and academic language.

Engaging EBs in complex tasks around challenging texts in English is no simple feat, but with the right tools at teachers' disposal, we know that it is one they can accomplish. Careful planning and consideration about appropriate texts, student characteristics, and the tasks that best scaffold instruction help facilitate EBs to engage in the kinds of discussions that will not only build English, but also create critical thinkers and speakers. ■

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Coaching Corner

continued from page 2

that are relevant and meaningful to their own specific situation (students, grade, subject, etc.). Coaches must work with teachers to determine which potential goal(s) make the most sense under the umbrella of overarching district priorities. Coaches allow teachers agency over their own learning by asking probing questions that encourage deep reflection." Such an interaction, rooted in mutual respect, positions both coach and teacher to be continuous learners, and to begin with a unique dialogue dependent on aspects particular to the teacher.

Differentiation has both a cognitive value and social value. Meeting individual needs is one way that coaches build relationships, as well as supporting professional learning. When coaches are viewed as a trusted resource, a cultural revolution is underway. Dr. Keene shares the following phrases from teachers describing the coach in their building: "Makes me a better teacher" and "Safe person to ask" as well as "Makes me think more deeply—clarifies ideas when I engage in cycles" and "Helps me reflect on my learning." "Coaching is now a part of our culture," Dr. Keene explains. "No one says, 'I don't want to be coached.' Instead, they say, 'The coach has my back.'"

Dr. Crystal speaks to the socio-cognitive value of the coach-teacher relationship in this way: "Teachers must trust coaches and feel safe enough to be vulnerable, take risks, and change course based on evidence of student learning and reflection."

Such trust is not the result of a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, differentiation is one significant hallmark of *Content-Focused Coaching* implemented thoughtfully and responsively. ■

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Welcome Courtney Francis



We are pleased to announce Courtney Francis has joined our team at the Institute for Learning as the new director of online learning and product development!

Courtney received an MS in Educational Technology and Applied Learning Science from Carnegie Mellon University in 2018,

supercharging her ability to design learner-centric educational tools based on cognitive science, data analysis, and technology trends.

Courtney is looking forward to applying her expertise in educational technology and product management experience in industry, startups, and academia to help IFL's online courses reflect our important education research and the effectiveness of our face-to-face workshops, and to position IFL to apply our research-backed instructional methods more broadly in real-world settings. Read more about Courtney on our website at <https://ifl.pitt.edu/about-us.cshtml>. ■

Improvement science

continued from page 3

The principals reflected on their work and named three common practices:

- Stay focused on mathematics content and student reasoning.
- Take an inquiry stance and cultivate inquiry.
- Engage in authentic collaboration.

Why did the common practices named by the administrators matter?

Taking an inquiry stance when positioning the test of change was one of the ways principals engaged teachers in the work. Principals created space to work alongside teachers so that they could take on issues and problems of practice collaboratively. Together, they brainstormed ways they might engage in small tests of change and identified the evidence they would collect to learn about the change. Since this practice was new to everyone, working jointly allowed them to establish clarity about why the evidence was needed, the types of evidence that would be helpful to analyze, and processes for collecting evidence that would be least disruptive to teaching and learning.

As data were collected and analyzed, principals took great care to cultivate dispositions in which everyone avoided leaping to definitive conclusions. Teachers and administrators had to learn to be tenacious, to probe their own and others' ideas and interpretations, to doubt, and to be skeptical. Working in this way is a learned process and requires a great deal of discipline on behalf of both the principals and the teachers.

Throughout this process, principals and teachers focused on very important practices in mathematics—the use of models and explanations and writing about mathematical reasoning. These effective teaching practices are ones that will support students in deepening their understanding of mathematics. When analyzing student work through these lenses, teachers and administrators can gain a deeper understanding of what students know and what they need to learn.

Additional insights will also be shared by New Brunswick principals at the IFL Leader Summit in June. ■

*See the [February issue of Bridges](#) to read about more details of this growth in student achievement in mathematics.