



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



Increasing cognitive demand and focusing on what students CAN do

Zuleima Perez
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As the supervisor of humanities (at the time) for New Brunswick School District, I have had the opportunity to work with the Institute for Learning (IFL) for the past 3 years, and one of the areas on which we focused during that time was increasing the cognitive demand in the classroom. During one of the IFL sessions, one of the teachers asked the IFL facilitator how her students could possibly engage in the kind of challenging work being shared during that session, especially since they couldn't even read yet. The response was, "Just because students can't read doesn't mean they can't think." Although this reply was in response to a particular question and a specific situation, I think it reflects what often holds teachers back from truly challenging students. Oftentimes, teachers see what students can't do instead of what they can.

Our district is determined to focus on what students can do, and part of that mission is to provide students with opportunities to develop their creative problem-solving and critical-thinking skills to innovate solutions to complex challenges. In order to support students in reaching that goal, the district's literacy

coaches and specialists partnered with the IFL to support teachers in raising the cognitive demand in the



classroom. We began by taking a look at the texts in our curriculum, recognizing that without challenging and engaging texts, cognitively demanding work is unlikely to occur. We examined the kinds of tasks we were asking of our students and developed instructional routines that pushed our students to deeper levels of thinking. We focused on asking questions that provided students with opportunities to analyze and interpret the ideas in the text and make connections within and across multiple texts. Because we felt this was important foundational work, the coaches and literacy specialists in the district worked closely with the classroom teachers providing demonstration lessons and meeting with them regularly to support them in developing the kinds of lessons that reflected the challenging work we now expected of our students. Through this hands-on support, our coaches and administrators developed the kind

of trust that is important to a successful coaching environment. We also implemented the IFL units into all of the grades, and students were further challenged by the tasks in these units. Again, our coaches and administrators worked closed with the teachers as they implemented the units, meeting regularly to discuss successes and offer support.

The key to moving this exciting work into the classrooms was the collaborative efforts among the reading specialists, administrators, and teachers. In between the IFL sessions, our coaches and literacy specialists provided teachers with the classroom-based support that allowed them to grow and allowed their students to succeed with these new expectations. After students in the elementary grades worked for several weeks on an IFL unit that highlighted the writings of author Lauren Tarshis, one of the students entered and was recognized for being one of 11 runners up in the Scholastic "I Survived" writing contest. This success story reflects the challenging and exciting work in our district, as well as the collaborative efforts of the teachers, coaches, literacy specialists, and administrators. I'm excited about the work we've done with the IFL over the past 3 years and look forward to our continued partnership. ■