Coaching Teachers for Success in Academically Diverse Classrooms

Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted

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Embedding Differentiation in Classroom Practice
1. Build a foundation of common definitions, understandings and strategies.
2. Provide time for planning and sharing (Wilson 2009...more than 40 hours)
3. Do follow-up and extension of strategies (Wilson 2009...up to a year)
4. Provide instructional coaching with descriptive feedback as teachers try out and implement the instructional strategies
5. Move into autonomous support through lesson study (within PLCs?)
6. Consider co-teaching models to lighten planning and management demands.

A coach...
helps teachers to recognize their instructional knowledge, strengths and limitations, and supports them in their learning and their application of new knowledge and instructional practices to benefit their students.

Adapted from Kowal & Steiner (2007)

Coaches could be collaborators or consultants or both!

Coaches work with teachers to help them improve their practice by modeling instructional strategies, co-teaching, co-planning lessons and units, or observing teachers, but always provide descriptive feedback.

What teachers want from a coach varies...

Coach as:

Idea Generator (Give me an idea for...)
Encourager, supporter (Should I try...)
Mentor (Give me some feedback on...)
Expert (Help me understand...)

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Levels of Collaboration

Level I Task Specific Collaboration
• Working together on short term tasks (school carnival, field trip, performance)
• Sharing administrative tasks (class lists)
• Discussing specific student issues (cafeteria)

Level II Targeted Collaboration
• Engaging in cross disciplinary projects
• Participating in grade level departmentalization
• Establishing group expectations for behavior etc.

Level III Instructional Collaboration
• Actively engaging in discussions about and critical reflection on teaching and learning
• Exploring and applying research based best practices
• Benefiting from each others' strengths, knowledge and experience in teaching and learning
• Sharing strategies and ideas willingly
• Serving as resources for one another in developing curriculum, lessons, and student tasks to meet the needs of all learners

Essentials for Level III Instructional Collaboration
• Regular and consistent time for reflective discussion.
• A commonly held framework and vocabulary for discussions about teaching and learning
• Trust, respect, and honesty
• A willingness to probe habits and beliefs and acknowledge limitations in experiences
• Commonly held goals to measure effectiveness
• Opportunities to make collaboration as effective and productive as possible

Principles of Defensible Differentiation that Underpin the Model:
• Deeply knowing the interests, learning profile and readiness needs of your students.
• Being clear and focused on what you want your students to know, understand and be able to do.
• Actively using formal and informal pre-assessment and formative assessment to guide your instructional decisions.
• Providing opportunities to motivate learning through student choice.
• Specifically matching students to tasks that are “just right, right now” for them through the use of tiered assignments.
• Using flexible grouping to manage and organize students by likeness rather than differences.
All of these elements must consistently operate within a classroom which values, honors, and respects the individual learner regardless of where they are on the learning spectrum.

Descriptive feedback focuses on what one succeeds in doing. It tends to be a critique.

Descriptive feedback is constructive, helpful information that clearly answers, “How can I do better?” It is coaching.

Descriptive feedback:
• describes why an action was correct.
• enables the teacher to see what has and hasn’t been achieved.
• provides ideas on better ways or approaches.
• suggests specific ways to improve teacher performance and student learning.

Descriptive feedback affects both performance and motivation because it provides specific information on “how to get better”.

Descriptive feedback answers:
Where am I?
What did I do well?
Where or how did I fall short?
How can I improve my work?
What next?

Descriptive Feedback Protocols
Where am I now? What went well?
Where am I going? How can I improve my work?
What next?

1. Comment on Strengths
What was done well and why
Comment on progress
Note strategies used
Describe strengths of the work based criteria (“look fors”)
Note improvement even if it does not yet meet criteria.

2. Provide Guidance
Suggest an improvement.
Offer an alternative strategy
Offer a comparison between their work and the criteria
Offer a comparison to the teacher’s previous work

When giving descriptive feedback consider “stars” and “steps”.
Stars... what was done well and why, progress, strengths
Steps... what next, how to improve next time

Descriptive Feedback must be focused:
• Centers around one or at most two, specific aspects of teacher performance
• Shares specific evidence related to the qualities that were targeted and observed

Descriptive Feedback must be specific:
• Focuses on how the strategies are used, not on how many strategies were used
• Provides evidence not interpretation
• Includes specific evidence from the teacher’s presentation of the lesson and the student engagement/learning.

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Characteristics of Successful Coaches

What does the research say?
Kowal & Steiner (2007)

1. Knowledge of Pedagogy
   • Experienced teachers who have demonstrated success in the classroom (trust).
   • A thorough understanding of how children from struggling to gifted learn.
   • Skills in developing and implementing instructional strategies—from questioning strategies to classroom management—to improve student learning (lots of ideas).

2. Content Expertise
   • Thorough understanding of the subject they are coaching
   • Familiarity with the curriculum that teachers are currently using.
   • Experience in and a deep understanding of data analysis and differentiated instruction.

3. Interpersonal Capabilities
   • Ability to build relationships
   • Ability to establish trust and credibility
   • Ability to tailor assistance to the individual educator’s needs.

Coaches tailor their work to meet teacher’s needs.

What are the teacher’s individual strengths and needs? (Where do we start?)

Will the changes will be hard? Easy?

Does the teacher need to see the value of this change in practice?

What feedback will best meet his or her needs?

What examples or resources need to be provided?

How do I best coach this individual?

Steps in Preparing for a Coaching Session

1. Confer with the teacher
2. Observe the teacher in the classroom
3. Debrief with the teacher (descriptive feedback)
4. Reflect on what you have learned together

Thinking Through Differentiation

1. Review the goals for the lesson and student learning profiles.
2. Ask: “Will some students already have this?” “Do all or some of the students need this?”
3. Consider where some students might struggle.
4. As appropriate plan and/or design a pre-assessment or formative assessment aligned with the lesson’s goals.
5. Consider “grouping strategies” based on data.
   (focus on “like” needs)

6. Review tasks/materials provided by the text or
   your own resources evaluating which tasks
   would best match the needs of each instructional
   group. Consider: rigor & complexity of tasks, concrete or abstract applications, degree of scaffolding necessary in light of the specific students in each group.

7. Determine which materials/tasks students
   will engage in. Will student choice be used in
   tasks or work arrangement?

Debrief Together: Descriptive Feedback

- Discuss the identified focus of the lesson
- Determine whether the goal was accomplished.
- Identify evidence of student learning
- Invite the teacher to share their reflections
  on the lesson (What went well? How do I know? What would I change about the lesson?)
- Seek clarification as appropriate
- Share what was learned by the coach and
teacher
- Discuss what was learned that can make a
difference in student performance.
- Discuss “what next?”

A Collaborative Coaching Model

1. Planning
   - Pre-Assessment by grade level, subject area
   - Interests and Burning Questions
   - Determination of goals
   - Application Expectations

2. Professional Development Work Sessions
   - Developing a common definition
   - What it is and isn’t
   - Instructional strategies reflecting their needs
   - Examples, modeling
   - Application time with colleagues

Collaborative Planning

1. Do you have any particular learning concerns
   about students in your classroom? Please feel free to bring samples of the student’s work or information about the student’s learning progress.

2. Bring any samples of student work, materials
   or resources you wish to review, discuss, or
   share.

3. If you would like assistance in modifying or
   adapting a task or materials, bring necessary
   files, books, tasks with you.
Lesson Study

Our Question: How does differentiation “look” with our curriculum and in our classrooms?

Background:
Lesson study is a professional development process that Japanese teachers engage in to systematically examine their classroom practices. Teachers work in groups in which teachers generally teach the same or similar grades or subjects. In Japan, teachers carry out 2 to 3 lesson study cycles per year. It is quickly becoming a strategy that American teachers are embracing as a way to work together to improve teaching and learning.

The Lesson Study Cycle

1. Teachers meet to discuss the specific needs of their students and identify a topic, process or skill that might benefit from a differentiated lesson.
2. Teachers collaboratively plan the lesson including at least one element of differentiation.
3. One teacher agrees to present the lesson to their students. Other teachers look on.
4. Teacher provides relevant information to the observers.
5. The teachers meet to discuss their observations of the lesson.
6. Teachers determine whether there are any steps or parts of the lesson that would benefit from some changes.
7. Other teachers from the team teach the revised lesson in their classrooms.
8. Teachers meet to discuss the results of their lesson presentations.
9. Teachers complete a summary evaluation of the process.

Benefits of This Collaborative Model

Develops a collaborative effort toward embedding the strategies of differentiation into classroom practice.

Engages the school leaders and teachers in conversations that focus on instruction and the needs of students. Coaching is not the same as supervision or evaluation of teachers!

Builds community and respect for the work of all teachers as they become more aware of the each other’s strategies, expertise, and endeavors to increase the success of all learners.

Moves school communities to greater autonomy in implementing and extending the practices of differentiation.

Others...

Collaboration was a big benefit because we could help each other and share ideas in creating our differentiated lesson.

Lesson Study:
A Handbook of Teacher-Led Instructional Improvement

Catherine Lewis (2002)
Research for Better Schools
References


