

Practices that lead to achievement— What are they?

By Alison Olzendam

The answer to this question was elusive the years I served as a building principal. In some classrooms students did not notice when I visited, while in others every

student's head turned as one of them shouted "So who's in trouble?" Why was it that the students in some classrooms were so engaged and busy that not one of them noticed my presence, and in other classrooms I garnered every student's attention? The difference was not found in the textbooks and curriculum being used, but in the teacher's classroom practices. I attempted to use this insight as I worked with teachers that were not as successful engaging students in rigorous tasks. While I had a picture in my head of what classrooms with rigor, relevance and relationships looked like, these teachers clearly did not. We were trying to communicate, but speaking different languages. We did not have a common language to talk about instruction. As well, I had what is now considered an outdated view of my role in the process. I was to visit classrooms, clipboard in hand, and watch what the teacher did. I was there to inspect and evaluate. It was not very effective, and when I think about all the hours I spent inspecting, my reaction is to want to apologize to all the teachers I worked with. If I had known then what I know now! Since leaving the principalship I have had the enriching experience of working with educators in many different school districts, increased my awareness of a principal's role in improving instruction and have also had the time to reflect on practice. I would like to share my insights about sound practices, learned from the educators I have had the good fortune to serve as well as current research in instructional practice. While there are no magic bullets, seven research based practices can

be identified in successful schools and classrooms.

Instructional frameworks

The use of an instructional framework or a common language is the foundation for successful practice. One of the first instructional frameworks was written by Madeline Hunter. Instructional Theory into Practice (ITIP) provided a picture of the "how" of classroom practice. Since then, numerous instructional frameworks have been developed.

They are research-based tools that have helped define classroom practice. As research into effective instructional practices has evolved, these tools have changed to reflect what we now know about effective classroom practice and the structures that support teachers employing these practices.

A review of rubrics and frameworks developed within the last ten years that have wide-spread use either nation-wide or in the state of Washington and are aligned to standards, was conducted by McGregor (2007). Six themes emerged from the review, and are noted in the table below.

Any instructional framework that attempts to include everything that is known about effective practice would be so large it would be unusable. The decision must be made then to include what is most important. The six prac-

Practice 1

The teacher designs effective, standards-based instruction

The lesson plan is mapped to state and/or district standards-based instruction, with clear goal(s) and objectives, and student tasks.

Practice 2

The teacher delivers high-quality, student-centered instruction

Instruction and facilitation of learning is clear, well-paced, and utilizes research-based strategies.

Practice 3

The teacher promotes high levels of student engagement

The teacher creates an environment that promotes a high level of student involvement in his or her learning.

Practice 4

The teacher uses assessment for student learning.

The teacher has developed clear assessment strategies for assessing students before, during, and after the lesson.

Practice 5

The teacher uses a positive behavior management strategy.

Expectations of student behavior are clear. The teacher monitors behavior in a manner which is subtle, positive, and preventative.

Practice 6

There is clear evidence that students are learning.

Evidence of student learning is explicit and observable.

tics identified in McGregor's (2007) research are clear and succinct. Within these practices it is also important to include language that asks teachers to think intentionally about how they create learning environments that enable children from all cultures and backgrounds to be successful. Culturally relevant teaching "fosters the kinds of social interactions in the classroom that support the individual in the group context" (Ladson-Billings, 1994). If we are to reach each and every child, then culturally relevant practices are required to insure that education is appropriate for every child. Effective teaching practices overcome barriers students bring to the classroom (Abbott, Fouts 2003). However, when teachers and students do not look alike or come from different backgrounds, there must be intentional reflection about connecting with these students. A celebration and recognition of the diversity in a classroom enables each student to be successful. Using an instructional framework that asks teachers to consider varied backgrounds and cultures ensures this intentional reflection. While effective and culturally responsive teaching and learning are found for the most part within the six practices identified by McGregor (2007), being explicit rather than implicit is important. "All children to achievement" does not allow for anything less than powerful teaching and learning and recognition of the power of students bringing prior knowledge and their culture to the classroom.

Implementing best practices

The creation of an instructional framework that provides a clear target and common language is necessary, but not sufficient to see these practices in classrooms.

While there is a clear and consistent body of research about teaching practices that close the achievement gap for all students, many teachers were not trained in these practices. The challenge

is to then use an instructional framework and support teachers in making changes in practice. Schmoker (2006) states "most, (though not all) instruction, despite our best intentions, is not effective but could improve significantly and swiftly through ordinary and accessible arrangements among teachers and administrators" (p. 10). Seventeen percent of classrooms in the State of Washington were identified as "clearly observable" when scored using a rubric of effective teaching practices (Abbott, Fouts, 2003). A study of six teachers employing powerful teaching and learning (Baker, Olzendam, Gratama, and Arrington, 2005) sought to identify how these teachers had developed these teaching practices with the underlying question, "Can all teachers develop these skills?" Based on the interviews in this study, and in alignment with Schmoker's (2006) findings, most teachers can develop these skills. Being a highly effective teacher is different than being a highly effective golfer or musician. How to help adults develop these skills, then, becomes the challenge. Teachers identified the following supports that helped them develop into powerful teachers: modeling of powerful teaching by mentors/fellow teachers, open classrooms where teachers watch each other and give non evaluative feedback and most importantly, a culture of trust (Baker, et. al 2005). Adults, like students, don't learn best in isolation. While an instructional framework is a necessary tool, used in isolation by individual teachers it alone will not change practice to any great degree.

Professional learning communities

One of the most significant practices to emerge is the creation of professional learning communities. Using an instructional framework within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) combines two practices that together create a safe learning environment for

teachers and a common language and clear target around effective teaching practices. As Danielson (1996) writes, "... research has clearly demonstrated that the effects of reflection improve teaching. Using a framework to guide such reflection enhances the value of the activity and makes teaching more purposeful, thoughtful, and rewarding" (p. 53).

We also know that Professional Learning Communities alone are not sufficient in raising student achievement. In a 2002 study Supovitz concludes: "The results suggest that although these types of organizational reforms may succeed in improving the culture within which teachers teach, they alone are unlikely to improve instruction and student learning. The communities that develop are often not communities engaged in instructional improvement" (p. 1591).

For principals and teachers, the structures that support changes in classroom practice are teachers engaged with each other in dialogue around instruction, using an instructional framework to guide the discussion. In working with Wallace Elementary School, one of the top five high poverty/high achievement schools in Washington State, I had the opportunity to see first hand how a Professional Learning Community can transform practices. Currently Wallace is in year 3 of implementation of PLC's. A fifth grade teacher talked about teaching the same way for 24 years, until the staff began to work in grade level teams, meeting 3-5 times a week. Subsequently his practice has changed and student achievement has soared. When asked why he changed classroom practice he replied: "Because of the commitment I made to my colleagues." Was it commitment to his principal? "Not so much" he replied. And this was said while seated next to his principal, who smiled and acknowledged the power of teachers working together toward a common goal. "Excellence: Expect it, Believe it,

Achieve it” is their guiding phrase for the work they do together.

To that end, a seventh effective practice supporting implementation of powerful teaching and learning includes the addition of Professional Learning Communities as the structure for infusing the Instructional Framework into classroom practice. The combination of the two reflects the progression of thought and practice in education. An instructional framework is a valuable and necessary tool for teachers. To be most effective it needs to be the basis of conversation within a Professional Learning Community. The addition of the seventh practice becomes the vehicle for having thoughtful, intentional conversations about instruction.

The principal's role

A teacher's professional practice has changed dramatically, from formerly working in isolation to frequently collaborating on practice. The principal's role has also changed dramatically, from inspection to coaching teachers in reflection of their own practice while supporting them to implement changes. It is essential that everyone in the system reflects on their practice, intentionally thinking about what they do and why. Principals need to model effective teaching practices in their work as well, faculty meetings being one example. If a principal conducts faculty meetings that are rigorous and relevant, allowing adults to construct knowledge, the culture comes full circle. In a conversation with Todd Baddeley, principal at Hanford High School, where teachers are successfully raising student achievement by working in instructional teams, he described his role as “a counselor who does data.” It is time to put away the clipboard. The principal as coach is much more effective in helping teachers to develop skills and construct their own knowledge about practice.

Conclusion

Educators are a conscientious, hard working group of professionals. I see examples every week. This energy and work ethic needs to be captured and transformed into a common focus to raising student achievement through a common language and collaboration and support among teachers and their administrators. The schools where this work has already begun are characterized by teachers who are energized by the success they are having with students and supported through the culture change in which they work. These teachers are focused on best practices and are working collaboratively in a trusting environment. Their leaders are coaches, who are also focused on best practices and supporting the work they do. The combination of an instructional framework and Professional Learning Communities provides the focus and support for teachers to create classrooms where all of our children can achieve.

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