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Strengthening the Impact of Professional Development— The Power of VISITAS™

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"I see now how other teachers at my school are managing the students, the charts and the content ..." Comments like this affirm the need for teachers who engage in rigorous professional development (PD) to receive support beyond initial training in order to effectively implement what they have learned. As part of our ongoing study of effective PD practices at Dual Language Education of New Mexico (DLeNM), we intentionally structure delivery of PD to include additional days in which teachers trained in a particular strategy, protocol, or framework collaborate to share their implementation experiences. Teachers value the opportunity to revisit the theory and practice of what they have learned, along with how it actually rolls out in the classroom.

Teachers at Charles M. Schenck Community School in Denver discuss their observations with Evelyn Chávez during the debrief portion of the VISITAS™ process.

Darling-Hammond (2010) states:

> A summary of experimental research found that short-term professional development experiences of 14 hours or less appear to have no effect on teachers' effectiveness, while a variety of well-designed, content-specific learning opportunities averaging about 49 hours over a 6- to 12-month period of time were associated with sizable gains… (p. 204)

DLeNM strives to support teachers in long-term professional development because we understand the commitment required to continually improve instructional effectiveness. To this end, one way in which we collaborate with teachers is through the process of VISITAS™, which stands for *Viewing Interactive Sheltered Instruction, Teachers, and Students*. In Spanish, the term VISITAS™ means "visits."

In *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), the authors share the practice of conducting classroom observations with teachers and instructional leaders in which an identified "problem of practice" is the focus. Through the process of these rounds, educators are able to build shared understandings, show improvement in teaching and learning, and create systemic change. DLeNM has adapted this process and anchored it in the development and implementation of our eight components of sheltered instruction to inform VISITAS™.

In order for VISITAS™ to work productively in any school or district, teachers must first buy into this process, understanding that it is not "something else" they have to do and that it is completely non-evaluative. Unlike other walk-throughs or observations in schools, VISITAS™ is intended to truly revolve around the "problem of practice" or instuctional focus that teachers have identified.

The process of VISITAS™ often begins with identifying a team of teachers, instructional

leaders, and administrators who will observe instruction. The following norms help to ensure that the process is "safe" and non-evaluative in nature:

❖ focus on student learning;
❖ look for what's there, not what's lacking (asset approach);
❖ encourage and celebrate risk-taking;
❖ keep the data collection anonymous;
❖ presume positive intent; and
❖ maintain confidentiality.

We work with the school to identify an area of instructional focus and develop a set of "look-fors" and a common note-taking form. For example, look-fors might include the following: evidence in the classroom of support for the use of academic language, student behaviors evident during academic conversations, strategies used to activate students' prior knowledge or create shared knowledge, or evidence of support for language development. Next, a team from the school identifies the classrooms to be observed in the first VISITAS™ cycle. The process is most effective when all teachers are observed over time. It is important to note that because the observations are used to identify school-wide instructional trends, the notes are anonymous and are not connected to specific teachers or classrooms. After the first classroom is visited, the team pauses briefly to discuss their written observation in order to ensure that they have a common understanding of the instructional focus they are looking for. When the observations are finished, the team gathers to share what they've seen. We ask teachers to review and share their observations in a quantifiable way. Often, they use the frame, "In 5 out of 7 classrooms, _____". The observations shared by the team are charted and later shared with the entire staff to discuss the information and identify trends and next steps. These might include a commitment to implementation, determination of additional support needed, or clarification of an instructional strategy.

The VISITAS™ process offers a powerful and logical approach for follow-up training to school PD intiatives. Once teachers have been trained in a new instructional practice and have had time to implement it in their classrooms, VISITAS™ can be used to guide teachers in an authentic, contextualized observation and reflection process to strenghten and extend their understanding and implementation of the PD.

DLeNM staff first fully implemented VISITAS™ at the schools that participated in our *Bright Spots Initiative*, funded through a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant. In each of the schools, instructional leaders and teachers were trained in the protocol and participated in a number of VISITAS™ throughout their multi-year PD opportunities. Many of the schools continue to utilize this process. Coronado Elementary, in Albuquerque, used VISITAS™ to improve teachers' skills in fostering and facilitating academic conversations. Not only did teachers find success in using the protocol for identifying areas of improvement and developing a common understanding of quality instruction, but also in supporting students' ability to communicate using academic language (see *Soleado*, Fall 2015, *soleado. dlenm.org*). At Reginald Chávez Elementary, also in Albuquerque, teachers chose varied ways to implement VISITAS™. Sometimes they "walked" in teams of grade-level teachers interested in visiting the classrooms of the grades below and above their own. Other times, they chose to walk in mixed-grade teams. Some of these walks focused on the implementation of AIM4S³™, a framework for sheltering mathematics content and language (*aim4scubed.dlenm.org*). AIM4S³™ PD increasingly includes VISITAS™ in follow-up sessions. At Reginald Chávez, teachers and instructional leaders alike were involved in identifying the VISITAS™ focus areas, thus creating a new culture of reflective practice.

Another manner in which DLeNM has used VISITAS™ is as follow-up to the rigorous 6 days of OCDE Project GLAD® Tier I certification training. In Austin ISD, Texas, we used this process 4 months after providing the Tier I training to a group of dynamic middle school teachers looking for more powerful ways to work with their adolescent language learners. In preparation for VISITAS™, we collaborated with the Project GLAD® leadership team formed by administrators and teacher-leaders of Webb Middle School to create the focus areas for these observations. Together, we decided on the areas of "student engagement in oral academic language during direct instruction," and "opportunties for students to practice and process the academic content and language." These represented the teachers' goal areas for teaching and learning in their classrooms. The VISITAS™ process provided the opportunity to develop a shared understanding of what these goals actually looked like in their middle school classrooms and how they are supported by Project GLAD®. Following the process described earlier, teachers were able to identifiy next steps in their use of the Project GLAD® strategies and provide information to the teacher leaders and administrators about further supports needed for deeper understanding and implementation.

In Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), Virginia, we conducted VISITAS™ with teams of dual language teachers from two elementary schools, Mt. Vernon and John Adams, who had been trained by DLeNM in Project GLAD®. We used the same protocol as in Austin ISD, but through creative scheduling, the school was able to provide substitutes to free up grade-level teams of teachers over 2 days. We walked through all classrooms, making observations based on the identified look-fors in large teams of eight to 10 teachers, school and district administrators, and a trainer. We followed the same process of debriefing, establishing trends, and creating a shared vision for the teachers' implementation and the supports needed to get there. The discussion was rich due to the fact that all teachers had the opportunity to observe and be observed— the conversations were authentic and deep. Feedback from teachers who participanted in VISITAS™ included, "I really enoyed the opportunity to observe my colleagues' classrooms—I learned so much from them!" and "I see now how other teachers at my school are managing the students, the charts and the content. Thank you for this opportunity!"

There are a variety of challenges and benefits to implementing the VISITAS™ process in your school. One challenge is creating the time for a group of teachers to leave their students in order to visit each other's classrooms and engage in productive conversations. Perhaps a greater challenge is teachers feeling comfortable with the idea of being observed by other teachers. They may feel like they might be negatively critiqued or they do not understand how such a process can benefit their instruction. For this reason, it is crucial to take the time to present and discuss the process with the teachers so that they know it is anonymous and non-evaluative. They should also be included in creating the focus areas for the observations. In the effort to engage teachers in a positive experience of VISITAS™, one option is to begin the process by observing in each other's classroom with no students present. In this case, the look-fors involve

Teams visit classrooms and then compile their observations during VISITAS™ at Charles M. Schenck Community School.

the environment and/or reading the walls. Once teachers have experienced VISITAS™, they have a clearer vision of what can transpire when their look-fors are based on instruction and observations are followed by analysis and discussion of the results.

While the process takes time and preparation, there are also many benefits to using VISITAS™. This experience is designed to be teacher and student-driven. It is centered on defining instructional focus areas, observing in classrooms, sharing those observations in a non-evaluative environment, engaging in reflective conversations about best practices in teaching and learning, and collectively determining next steps. The process promotes transparency and collaboration among the teachers and validates their role as the leaders and innovators of classroom instruction, while fostering common understanding of the instructional practice under consideration. The possiblity for teacher buy-in and engagement is increased because teachers are central to the creation of the instructional vision. The ultimate goal is for school staff to plan, organize, and facilitate the VISITAS™ process independently.

VISITAS™ reflects the ongoing study and evolution of professional development at DLeNM. We continue to learn from our collaboration with teachers and administrators as we refine this process and make it an integral part of professional development partnerships.

References

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