

This is the time of the year when reflection and introspection help define the year's progress and what areas of strength and need are identified for planning purposes. What were the goals for the year; how did we get from point "A" to point "B"; how do we know that the goals were accomplished; what do we do if the goals were not met; and for coaches, what is my role for next year? Although we do not have a crystal ball to see the future and to help anticipate the challenges we might encounter, the instructional coaches have an incredible opportunity to gather the collective wisdom of the practitioners in schools and to share that wisdom so all may benefit. As Confucius says, "By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is the noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."

So, what have you learned about your practice as a coach, about teachers' practices in your coaching cohort, about the school leadership practices for school wide improvement and about how students learn and take ownership of their learning? How did you work one-on-one and in small groups with teachers, helping them to collect data to inform their instructional design and model evidence-based literacy practices across all content areas? How did you work with school leaders to help them understand the merit of a non-evaluative BDA cycle of consultation? Not so easy to answer, especially when you were learning new skills to help you practice your craft. Not easy, either, to discover that some of your own practices did not yield the expected outcomes.

I'm sure one of the most critical lessons you learned was the importance of building a collaborative environment and developing trusting relationships with your colleagues. In some cases, that entailed learning how to navigate a new role and new responsibilities with very familiar colleagues. You probably modeled reflection and provided ample opportunities for feedback about what you were doing, not just what you were seeing as you supported classroom instruction. You helped others understand why thinking and understanding your own practice was essential to change. I am wondering how your own philosophy of teaching was challenged as you encouraged teachers and school leaders to explore new ways to reflect on and about teaching, learning, and the broader school community.

As an instructional coach, your role is to maintain integrity to the teaching profession by helping teachers and school leaders understand the significance of questioning one's own beliefs and practices, reflecting on those practices, recognizing what student engagement looks like, and by providing ongoing opportunities to nourish professional growth and learning for both students and teachers. It is a process where the gradual release of responsibility is the difference between giving the fish and teaching how to fish. It is this point of understanding and reflection that result in disclosure and awareness; it is an emotional process that is individual and

stressful. It is almost an "out of body" experience that many feel is a lonely, insightful yet productive encounter with one's self.

Instructional coaches help teachers translate research into practice and improve the effectiveness of their instructional practice. They are the missing link in transforming schools. They advocate collaboration and collective problem solving that is not contrived and instead promotes an environment that is non-threatening. They help sustain a focus on improved student learning through a process of ongoing education, modeling, practicing, thinking, reflecting, and communicating in ways that keep students at the center. Although this environment does not happen overnight, one conversation at a time can change a culture as long as the practice is not abandoned and patience is understood.