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A Proposal To Study Performance Variations

At the International School of Luxembourg (ISL), we are privileged to have teachers and students from all over the world. As teachers, we each have our own talents and ways that we approach teaching our students. We have all been trained by different universities in many parts of the world. While this varied background helps us to have great diversity as a teaching staff, it also means that our students face performance variations because of the differences in our approaches. So how can we determine whose teaching methods are best?

We need to open up our classrooms and the dialogue about how we teach and what the best methods are. We need to base our observations and opinions about what is best practice based on what current research says. This research can be external, but it also needs to be internal, so that we look at what methods have the most effective results with our students. We need to encourage teachers to take chances and experiment in the classroom to find new ways to best reach our students.

Some teachers have the ability to reach their students in more effective ways than others. To be sure, as teachers, we all have our own strengths and weaknesses. Some are strong in mathematics, while others are stronger at language arts. The question is how do we as an organization work towards closing the achievement gaps we see in our teaching and ultimately in the students' success and learning at our school? It is my proposal that we begin within and across our grade levels to discuss not just simply the content and

what we teach, but that we also look at both internal and external research about what best practice dictates.

At our school, we have three 45-minute periods of collaborative planning in a seven-day cycle. For my grade level (4th grade), these periods have been consumed this year by discussing what we are doing with our inclusion time with the English as an additional language (EAL) teacher, what we are going to be teaching in mathematics (the textbooks we had were taken away this year), discussing what we are teaching for spelling (since this text also was taken away), completely changing a unit of learning on geography, by removing a project and taking a new approach (this was more or less mandated and was not a discussion of how we teach), and discussing what we are going to do when we have for the first time at our school student-led conferences in March. As one can see, this year has been filled with lots of changes, experiments, and challenges. However, what have been missing in all of these changes are the conversations about what current research shows to support these changes.

I feel like we are currently treading water at my grade level. Yes, we are surviving currently, but you can only tread for so long and right now, we are not getting anywhere. In order to move forward, we need to look at what external research says to support these changes, so that we have a better understanding of why (or even if) these changes are best for our students. We also need to create criteria for our own internal research to explore the success of these changes.

I am sure that there has been research by our leadership team to support these changes, but the research needs to be discussed with the staff, so that everyone has the

same understanding. Right now, we are left wondering if these changes were made because of someone's (in the leadership team-either our assistant principal, deputy principal, or principal) firsthand experiences or are they simply trying to input things they have done in the past (Pfeffer and Sutton, p.64)? Even our middle leaders (grade level leaders) are not sure what research was used to determine these changes

So my proposal is that we take the time at our school to discuss how we teach (not only at the grade levels, but also vertically across the grades) and that we look at research to determine what best practice is.

I have been fortunate enough to work at ISL for almost five years now. In that time, we have spent a lot of time discussing what we teach based on activities and things that have been done in the past. However, we have spent very little time actually looking at research and what best practice dictates. In their article called "Evidence-Based Management," Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton state, "Seasoned practitioners sometimes neglect to seek out new evidence because they trust their own clinical experience more than they trust research (p.64). However, if we are always looking in the past, then how do we move forward and looking into the future?

While this year we have certainly changed things around in several areas, the two critical items that have been missing from these discussions of the changes listed previously are what evidence is there to support these changes as being best practice? and what evidence are we going to collect to show that these changes have brought an improvement in student learning?

In our lower school meetings, (which are every Wednesday) we have spent very little time having open discussions on how we teach. Generally, our leadership team is talking to us about teaching. With all of the changes we have had this year, we also have yet to have a chance to even discuss across the grade levels what successes and failures we are finding. Having these types of conversations would be helpful because we could use our own experiences to gain new perspectives on how we can approach these changes.

In our Wednesday meetings, we have also had slim opportunities to discuss and look at what research says. As part of my proposal, I think that one of the Wednesday meetings should be dedicated to meeting across grade levels to analyze and discuss both external and internal research to see how it can be applied to our school.

What I ideally want to create through this proposal is a community of practice within our school. Communities of practice are groups of people who learn together by focusing on problems that are directly linked to their work (Wenger and Snyder p.143). At our school, we would become a community of practice by discussing how we teach and looking for best research to support what we are doing. "Communities of practice are emerging in companies that thrive on knowledge (Wenger and Snyder p.145)." As educators, we need to thrive on knowledge because it is in the best interest of our students and their learning.

"Communities of practice add value to organizations because they help drive strategy, they start a new line of business (in our case of education they will help generate new ideas and innovations in our teaching), they solve problems quickly, they transfer

best practices, they develop professional skills, and they help recruit and retain talent (Wenger and Snyder, p. 140-141)." I believe that these are all things that we say we strive for in our school, but are there ways that we can strive to achieve these in a better way? I believe there are and they are focused around discussing best research, so we can apply it to our practices.

While I am using the term communities of practice a little bit loosely compared to how Etienne C Wenger and William M. Snyder describe them, I do like the idea of communities of practice in education. Ideally, in our school, we would want everyone to buy into this idea of exploring as a community our practices and seeing what research we can use to help us define our best path forward.

The great thing about ISL is that we have a lot of the things we would need for this proposal to be successful. We already have established collaborative planning time in our grade levels and we have the opportunities to meet on Wednesdays for two and a half hours to plan as a lower school. This proposal is simply for us to use our time in a more effective manner that is focused on learning and applying research to our classroom.

Just like in our classrooms our students don't learn best by being told what to think or what to do, we as teachers don't only want changes to be mandated upon us. We want to find our own understanding and I believe the best way for us to do this is to explore and to be actively engaged in these Wednesday meetings.

Our school has a ridiculously large budget for professional development, which is one of the ways that we as an organization can stay current with best research. However,

in the five years I have been at ISL, there have only been a few colleagues who have really shared or discussed with the lower school what they learned when they went away for professional development. This can increase the within-school variance for student learning because the teachers who are going away on PD opportunities are keeping what they learned to themselves. Their students then are being taught in a way that is using current research, while others are not. In order to reduce the within-school variance for our students and to open up our teaching practices, we need to share what we have learned from our external professional development so that everyone can stay as up to date as possible with what current research means for the classroom.

Due to these factors above, I see this proposal as having zero additional cost to our budget then what is already allowed.

The biggest challenge I see to this proposal are the teachers who are at our school that are used to the way things have been done and see no need for change or are afraid of change. This proposal of basing what we do in the classroom on research would challenge these teachers because they would need to stay current with what new research says. It would deter and hopefully prevent teachers from using, "Well, this is what we have done in the past" as their only justification for what they are teaching in their classrooms.

This proposal will cut the within-school variance because teachers will learn from each other and build on one another's strengths and capabilities (Gawande's idea of positive deviance p. 25). This, in turn, will make teaching practices in classrooms much

more common and provide the students with a similar and better education in each classroom.

Atul Gawande wrote, "We always hope for the easy fix: the one simple change that will erase a problem in a stroke. But few things in life work this way. Instead success requires making a hundred small steps go right – one after the other, no slipups, no goofs, everyone pitching in (p.21)." This quote really defines what it will take for this proposal to be successful. Everyone must be involved in order for this proposal to reduce the within-school variance. As a school, we can define our success of this proposal to base our teaching practices on our research by analyzing common assessments and discussing performance variations that we see in the classroom. From these assessments, we can then discuss how in our own classrooms we have taught our students, which will allow us to learn from one another and come to common understandings of best practices.

This proposal as Gawande states will not occur quickly, but in the end, basing our teaching on internal and external research will help to reduce within-school variance for our students and ultimately lead to success for the teachers and students. "Initial studies suggest that physicians trained in evidence-based techniques are better informed than their peers, even 15 years after graduating from medical school (Pffeffer and Sutton p. 73)." While this quote uses the medical field, I also believe the same would be true in education and this proposal would develop this for our school.

References

Gawande, Atul (2007) *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*. Metropolitan Books

Pffeffer, Jeffrey and Sutton, Robert (2006) Harvard Business Review. *Evidence-Based Management*

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