Power Tool: Look Fors

Good professional development includes clearly defining what appropriate and effective instructional innovation looks like in the classroom. Implementing a new innovation requires that every teacher participates in the plan at a high level. An essential part of creating effective professional development is setting clear expectations. Look fors help establish standards for high-quality innovations in the classroom and bridge the gap between learning what to do and doing it.

Definition and Purposes for Look Fors

A look for is a clear statement that describes an observable teaching or learning behavior, strategy, outcome, product, or procedure. Observers search for look fors when they visit a classroom or examine student work. Teachers can reflect on look fors to compare their teaching practices to established standards, define what they learn through professional development, and develop descriptors for classroom practice. School and district leaders can use look fors to define standards for all classrooms, identify achievable and identifiable improvements, and unify a school around a common focus and set of practices.

Examples of Look Fors

Generic look fors have clear descriptions or indicators on classroom design, general standards for curriculum implementation, and instructional techniques. These general standards are good starting points for teacher team discussions about good teaching practice. Specific look fors describe a detailed teaching technique or proven practice. These look fors are directly connected to specific innovations that teachers study in professional development workshops.

　　Nancy worked with an elementary school faculty to create a set of look fors on a writer's workshop. During the workshop, teachers studied findings from leading thinkers and authors such as Lucy Calkins (1994), Nancie Atwell (1987), Donald Graves (1983), and Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi (2001). Teachers began to put the writing techniques into practice and experimented

with components of the writer's workshop model. Although teachers were expected to implement all parts of the workshop, the principal observed some inconsistencies in the classrooms.

Nancy assisted this faculty by defining the look fors from the perspective of the teachers. After agreeing on what each part of the workshop would look like at their school, the whole group made a commitment to include the look fors in their workshops. This school's efforts appear in Figure 6.5. This figure shows what these teachers knew about this model, how they modified the look fors to encompass their new understanding, and how they solidified their learning with continued use of this model. Eventually the look fors from the writer's workshop helped principals promote reflection during team meetings and give feedback to teachers after visiting their classrooms.

Figure 6.6 contains examples of both generic and specific look fors. These examples emphasize the following:

- Look fors are powerful when they are developed by the people who use the innovation. We have learned that look fors that are created with a top-down approach are not as effective with teachers. A discussion on creating look fors with principals appears later in this chapter.
- Look fors created by teachers are best when they are flexible, because new understandings will emerge with practice and feedback.
- Long lists of look fors that are not supported by sufficient professional development will not help teachers with classroom implementation. Identify a practice and define the most essential and salient features. Next, select a few look fors to ensure that all the components of a practice become part of the descriptors. Add more details as implementation becomes complete.

How to Develop Look Fors

Look fors should be developed as a part of the process of learning any new innovation. The following tips are essential for creating powerful look fors:

- Avoid creating look fors before conducting a professional development workshop on a new practice. Begin the work only after teachers have had focused study and reflection on the practice.

Figure 6.5 Writer's Workshop Look Fors

Classroom Environment and Climate
• Writing supplies available to students and easily located in the classroom
• Seating permits space for writing, conferencing, mini-lessons, sharing, and displays of work
• Procedures for each part of the workshop are taught and practiced
• Climate of risk taking
• Space for display of student work
• Resources are readily available to students (e.g., dictionaries, word walls)
• Examples of good work are modeled and discussed

Mini-lessons
• Clear, appropriate objectives are posted and/or stated
• Teacher models effective writing or uses student work as model
• Lessons are short, focused, and directed toward objective
• Evidence of continuity of lessons based on student need
• Topics are appropriate to the developmental level of students
• Content of mini-lessons includes the writing process, writing traits, and writing genres

Status Check
• Teacher checks quickly with each student in regard to their writing progress
• System in place to record and monitor each child's progression
• Students self-report and evaluate where they are in their writing process
• Status checks are short (less than 1 minute) per student
• Students are aware of the purpose and procedure of the status check

Writing Time
• "Bubble of silence" observed during some of the writing time
• Students write
• Teacher actively conferences and monitors student writing
• Students self-assess and use peer assessment
• Topics are student-driven with a choice of topic within the genre being studied
• Prompt writing is limited but incorporated into overall writing plan
• Students use resources during writing (e.g., dictionaries, word walls, and thesauruses)
• Writing time happens every day in writer's workshop and occupies the largest block of time

Conferencing
• System in place to ensure that every student benefits from conferencing time
• Teacher conferences with several students each day
• Focus is on the writer, not fixing the writing
• Conferences include references to teaching points made in previous mini-lessons
• Teachers ask questions of writers and listen to responses
• Teacher sits with student and makes frequent eye contact
• Teacher uses system for recording conference information and observation

- Use a process-oriented discussion to develop the indicators.

- Use a consultant or an in-house content expert for quality control and to ensure that the main ideas are embedded in the look for list.

Figure 6.6 Examples of Look Fors

Look Fors for General Teaching and Learning
- Displays of student work show what students know and are able to do
- Daily lessons match district and state curriculum goals
- Students are actively engaged in learning
- Students are asked to justify their thinking and their responses
- Students participate in creating criteria for scoring guides and use the guides to evaluate their own work and the work of their peers
- Students are engaged in discussion and independent thought about high-level problems and questions; low-level recall is minimized
- Teachers pose questions and wait for students to think and respond; every student is accountable for an answer

Look Fors for Proven Practices

Guided Reading for Primary Grades
- Teacher supplies each student with his or her own text
- Teacher gives each student the opportunity to read independently at his or her own pace
- Teacher circulates among the group and observes each student's reading behavior
- Teacher supports each reader's attempts to solve problems
- Teacher helps readers initiate efficient problem-solving strategies

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Joseph Werlinch and Otto Graf, consultants and professors at the University of Pittsburgh, adapted the jigsaw group process to develop look fors. This process involves using focused questions to narrow a user's thinking about an innovation This technique saves considerable time for administrators and teachers because they can create look fors by using broad questions based on the fundamentals of the innovation rather than beginning with a blank page. For example, administrators and teachers can use the jigsaw technique for a writing workshop by predetermining broad categories such as mini-lessons, status check, conferencing, student writing, and sharing specific indicators. Because these broad categories are preselected, widely accepted, and understood, the shared decision-making process will not be compromised.

References

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