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Date: Tue Aug 17, 2004 10:01:03 AM US/Eastern
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I once explained TPRS to an administrator using a sports analogy.

I coached Little League for a number of years. In Little League, every player has to play two innings and get an at-bat, which means that on your team you will have experienced players and nine-year-olds who often have no clue about the game. But all players had to play. As a coach, it was my job to teach them about baseball.

I orchestrated everything: the practices, the breaking-down of the various skills (fielding fly balls and grounders, how to bat properly, bunting, and then all of the defensive drills with men on base, etc.) At all stages my assistant coaches and I were instructing while the players were doing the drills and playing in the field. The repetition of those skills was critical. The better you instructed and the better you prepared the players, the easier it was for them once they got into a real game. You always have your best, better, and maybe adequate players. That is your team. It is important to keep a tight rein on Little Leaguers during practices: They have to know who is in charge, but as a coach you make it fun, worthwhile, and a good baseball experience.

One of the best things as coaches was to make them believe that they could win any game. For instance: Because of the heat of summer, I used to bring water from my house. I always would meet with the team as they came off the field. Once, we were behind in a game, so I told them, "We've got something that the other team doesn't have: The secret sauce." The kids looked at me. Then I said, "We've got that good Cornville water, boys...The secret sauce!" That became our rallying cry that whole summer. What always amazed me was how the weaker players "came along" as the season progressed. Our team built traditions.

Through all of the practices I had been doing the instructing. Come game time, they had to play the game.

As TPRS teachers, we do exactly the same thing. From Day 1, we begin teaching structures and vocabulary. We MUST be the person directing the action. We are the people who know the language. As a Little League coach, I didn't explain baseball by having the players sit on the bench. They took the field and we constantly practiced.

In the classroom, we are the coaches. We constantly ask questions as students "field" the structures in their mind. They also "make the plays" by giving us answers to "either/or" questions, by giving exaggerated responses, by being creative. Our best students learn the language easier, but like the weaker Little League players, our barometer students can also learn. They may not learn as well as or as thoroughly as the best students, but they can learn a language as long as they keep practicing (and for those students who refuse to learn, they are like the Little Leaguer who takes his glove and watches from the bench. He is not going to improve by sitting there.)

Our "secret sauce" in the classroom is how we lower the affective filter, how we build a class spirit and hopefully one of camaraderie, and how we progressively help students acquire advanced structures. Coaches prepare players to play at that next level. TPRS teachers teach in the same way. We are preparing them for the next level. Well-coached players feel confident playing in a game and moving to that next level. Well-taught TPRS students feel confident moving on to the next level, the next learning institution, or in even another country where the language is spoken.

So when an administrator observes and asks about "teacher-centered" vs. "student-centered," ask him/her to watch any of the coaches in your high school for a week, from practices to the game. The coaches instruct constantly as the players participate. Then it's game time. (Are teams "coach centered" or "player-centered"?) You'll find that successful teams have coaches who prepare their players well and who breed confidence once those players are in the game (just like lowering the "affective filter")

We TPRS teachers do the same thing as a good coach. Come "game time", we want our students to be proficient, and we are the ones who must lead them there.

Mike Walker