

Reflections on Transformative Professional Development: Improving Practice and Achievement

Elaine Simos, longtime NCTE member, joined CEL in 2011, and Kathy Smith, NCTE member since 2002, joined CEL in 2015, Downers Grove North High School, Downers Grove, Illinois

In recent years, much research has emerged affirming that effective professional development for teachers should have a content focus, which includes knowledge of subject matter and how students learn content; active learning, which involves teachers working with specific content through vicarious classroom experiences; duration, which includes ongoing professional development that is the opposite of the one-shot workshop; and coherence, which refers to the teachers' understandings that the professional development is consistent with their own experiences, as well as school, district, and state reform policies (Desimone,

2009). Professional development must allow teachers to focus on content and pedagogical knowledge, provide opportunities for real-time implementation, and develop important collaboration and reflection that lead to improved teacher practice and student achievement.

The national conversation about schools now includes an emphasis on the use of instructional coaching to develop instructional practices that positively impact student achievement because it offers all of these important components. This new exploration of the effects of coaching on the educational system is unsurprising. Increasingly, teachers report a need for coaches, not

evaluators, to change their practices and positively impact student learning (Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010, p. 157). Moreover, Levin asserts that the foundation for successful school change is predicated on the "balance between focusing on a few key outcomes that relate to better teaching and learning, . . . building capacity for improvement, building motivation, . . . and increasing support for the . . . program of improvement" (2008, as qtd. in Hattie, 2011, pp. 170–171).

Why Start a Coaching Program?

The demand for meaningful, ongoing, situational learning for teachers has made coaching and professional learning communities popular choices for professional development. Numerous studies support the fact that coaching is effective in both transforming teacher practices and increasing student achievement (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2006; Gross, 2010; Matsumara, Garnier, Correnti, Junker, & DiPrima Bickel, 2010; Pomerantz & Pierce, 2013; Sturtevant & Link, 2007). Coaching provides opportunities for implementation of new instruction, collaborative dialogue among classroom teachers, deep reflection, and constructive feedback (Griffith, Ruan, Stepp, & Kimmel, 2014, chapter 10), all of which are proven to be successful in increasing teacher knowledge of pedagogy and content.

Downers Grove North High School has been able to sustain a successful coaching program since 2005, which has been built around a belief in content-focused, situational learning and meaningful context. In our setting, a literacy coach is defined as

The Conference on English Leadership (CEL) of the National Council of Teachers of English is an organization dedicated to bringing together English language arts leaders to further their continuing efforts to study and improve the teaching of English language arts. The CEL reaches out to department chairs, teachers, specialists, supervisors, coordinators, and others who are responsible for shaping effective English instruction. The CEL strives to respond to the needs and interests germane to effective English instruction from kindergarten through college, within the local school, the central administration, the state, and the national level.

It is the policy of NCTE in its journals and other publications to provide a forum for the open discussion of ideas concerning the content and the teaching of English and the language arts. Publicity accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by the Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, or the membership at large, except in announcements of policy where such endorsement is clearly specified.

English Leadership Quarterly (ISSN 1943-3050) is published four times a year in August, October, February, and April for the Conference on English Leadership by the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Rd.,

Urbana, Illinois 61801-1010.

Annual membership in NCTE is \$50 for individuals, and a subscription to *English Leadership Quarterly* is \$25 (membership is a prerequisite for individual subscriptions). Nonmembers and institutions may subscribe for \$75. Student and emeritus subscriptions are \$12.50 (plus \$25 for NCTE membership). Single copy: \$18.75 (member price, \$6.25). Remittances should be made payable to NCTE by check, money order, bank draft in United States currency, or credit card (call NCTE toll-free at 877-369-6283).

Communications regarding orders, subscriptions, single copies, and change of address should be addressed to *English Leadership Quarterly*, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1010 or sent via email to orders@ncte.org. Communications regarding permission to reprint should be addressed to Permissions, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1010 or sent via email to permissions@ncte.org.

NCTE's website: www.ncte.org

Editor: Oona Abrams. NCTE Editing and Production: Pamela A. Crews. Designer: Pat Mayer.

Copyright © 2017 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Printed in the U.S.A.

an expert with knowledge in learning processes, including reading multiple types of texts, writing for a variety of purposes, and communicating in a variety of contexts and settings (Toll, 2005). During coaching, the content-area teacher and the coach collaborate on the implementation of instruction that will maximize student learning (Griffith et al., 2014, chapter 10). Research demonstrates that successful coaching models include opportunities for the coach and the classroom teacher to meet to collaborate on beliefs about instruction and pedagogy (Griffith et al, 2014); in addition, the coach acts as a partner in the planning and implementation of explicit instruction to help students become independent thinkers, readers, communicators, and problem-solvers (2014). A coach who is well-respected and knowledgeable will help build a strong, sustainable program.

Coaching and Collaboration

Coaching programs should be centered on collaborative relationships between coaches and teachers designed to positively impact student learning. This relationship is defined by its synergetic nature: coaches and teachers are equal partners in the process. At North High School, we have coached teachers from all content areas and have found long-term success in developing collaborative partnerships that are based upon mutual respect and a willingness to take risks; work in which one partner is viewed as the sole provider of meaningful contributions is not successful.

Additionally, coaches should function as guides who focus the collaboration's efforts on curricular standards and specific evidence of student learning. Partnerships that solely emphasize relationship-building are, by definition, limited in scope; similarly, work that is focused on the implementation of a particular program or set of given strategies does not center educators' work on the evidence of student learning produced

by the unique group of learners with whom they work. Subsequent classroom interventions tend to produce results that are not clearly measurable and to yield conclusions about student achievement that are sometimes amorphous. This lack of specificity in determining what and how students are able to achieve both prior to and after implementation is contrary to the goals of a successful coaching program.

Coaching and School Culture

A successful coaching program is an integral component of a healthy school's culture. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) suggest that the ideal school culture is collaborative in nature and best suited to creating an environment in which "help, support, trust, openness, collective reflection and collective efficacy" define both student and teacher learning (p. 51). Sweeney (2013) developed a specific set of practices and characteristics that work in tandem with a school's culture to provide an environment in which all learners, professional and amateur, are successful; these values are centered on an understanding that it is student learning that must drive a school. Administrators support this work by providing time and access to resources. Administrative support is vital in building an effective coaching program that continues to grow and expand its role. Securing support for a program at the department, school, and district levels and facilitating scheduling and coaching availability will ensure access to the program for the entire faculty. Lemov (as qtd. in Sweeney, 2013, p. 88) further identified this culture as one in which participation in the work at hand is not optional. In short, every stakeholder in the school building is a valued and necessary member of this learning network.

Structures for Professional Development

As school funding continues to be an issue for more and more schools, it is crucial that policymakers and

administrators make informed decisions about what models of professional development have been proven effective. Croft, Coggsball, Dolan, Powers, and Killion (2010), in a brief from the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center, and the National Staff Development Council, call for job-embedded professional development (JEPD). JEPD is training that is integrated into the work day and involves an inquiry-based approach for teachers. In addition, this professional development is directly connected to the classroom and involves teachers collaborating on lesson planning, examining student work, and observing and providing feedback to each other. Workshops and institutes are not considered to be job-embedded training, although these types of professional development may have some value. Croft, Coggsball, Dolan, and Powers (2010) recommend providing teachers with opportunities during the school day to collaborate, monitor student progress, and make instructional decisions based on student data. One of the JEPD structures suggested in this brief is ongoing coaching, which is our focus at North High.

Standards for Professional Learning

Learning Forward (2009) created seven standards for professional learning to serve as a framework as educators and policymakers continue to plan research-based professional development at state and local levels:

- **Learning Communities:** Professional learning that improves teacher effectiveness and increases student achievement occurs in learning communities that are committed to continuous improvement through collective responsibility and goal alignment.
- **Leadership:** Effective professional learning requires skillful

leaders who support teachers in deepening content and pedagogical knowledge and serving as advocates in the classroom.

- **Resources:** Effective professional learning requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.
- **Data:** Professional learning must use a variety of sources to collect data that guides planning, assessment, and evaluation of its effectiveness for both educators and students.
- **Learning Designs:** Effective professional learning design integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve intended outcomes.
- **Implementation:** Effective professional learning is sustained through applying research on long-term change.
- **Outcomes:** Effective professional learning aligns its goals with educator performance and student curriculum standards.

Conclusion

In sum, educational research documents the effectiveness of coaching as a form of professional development. The best way to convince building leaders to implement research-based professional learning is to share this research and be a powerful voice for what is proven to work for both teachers and students. Coaching should not be utilized as a means of remediation, but as a means of continued growth for all teachers. In this environment, it is vital that coaching be defined as a collaborative effort that is of value for educators

Coaching should not be utilized as a means of remediation but as a means of continued growth for all teachers.

at every level of their careers and professional effectiveness. Once the right professionals are in place, a coaching program has the potential to powerfully transform teacher practice and increase student achievement. ●

References

- Biancarosa, G., Bryk, A. S., & Dexter, E. R. (2010). Assessing the value-added effects of literacy collaborative professional development on student learning. *The Elementary School Journal, 111*(1), 7–34.
- Croft, A., Coggshall, J. G., Dolan, M., & Powers, E. (2010). Job-embedded professional development: What it is, who is responsible, and how to get it done well. Issue Brief. *National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality*.
- Desimone, L. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher, 38*(3), 181–199.
- Elish-Piper, L. & L'Allier, S. K. (2011). Examining the relationship between literacy coaching and reading gains in grades K–3. *The Elementary School Journal, 112*(1), 83–106.
- Griffith, P. L., Ruan, J., Stepp, J., & Kimmel, S. J. (2014) The design and implementation of effective professional development in elementary and early childhood. In Martin, L. E., Kragler, S., Quatroche, D. J., Bauserman, K. L. (Eds) *Handbook of professional development in education: Successful models and practices, PreK–12* (pp. 189–228). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Gross, P. A. (2010). Not another trend: Secondary-level literacy coaching. *The Clearing House, 83*, 133–137.
- Gruenert, S., & Whitaker, T. (2015). *School culture rewired: how to define, assess, and transform it*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Hattie, J. (2011) *Visible learning for teachers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Learning Forward (2009). Standards for professional learning: Quick reference guide. Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/docs/pdf/standardsreferenceguide.pdf>
- Matsumura, L. C., Garnier, H. E., Correnti, R., Junker, B., & DiPrima Bickel, D. (2010). Investigating the effectiveness of a comprehensive literacy coaching program in schools with high teacher mobility. *The Elementary School Journal, 111*(1), 35–62.
- Pomerantz, F., & Pierce, M. (2013). “When do we get to read?” Reading instruction and literacy coaching in a “failed” urban elementary school. *Reading Improvement, 50*(3), 101–117.
- Sturtevant, E. G. & Link, W. M. (2007). Secondary literacy coaching: A Macedonian perspective. *International Reading Association, 240–250*.
- Sweeney, D. (2013). *Student-centered coaching at the secondary level*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Toll, C. (2005). *The literacy coach's survival guide*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Vanderburg, M., & Stephens, D. (2010). Impact of literacy coaches: What teachers value and how teachers change. *The Elementary School Journal, 111* (1), 141–163.