Reflections on Transformative Professional Development: Improving Practice and Achievement

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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...
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 and 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, Cogshall, 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, Cogshall, 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 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**


