

## **Supporting Changes in Practice Through Coaching Conversations**

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### **Introduction**

For decades, school leaders have been attempting to find ways to support student academic success by supporting classroom instruction. As teachers work in a climate of change, they are frequently asked to make changes in their practice that may or may not come easily to them. In order to support teachers through these changes, coaching and consultation models have been adopted by many schools. In the course of employing various coaching and consultation models, there comes a point when the coached teacher makes a decision to change based upon a reflective conversation with a consultant or coach. The thesis of this article is that the specific point of change can be identified and therefore the contributing conversation structures and factors that led to this change can be analyzed. The value of an analysis of this type is that it can provide insight and guidance to school leaders who are attempting to lead other staff through change. A thorough understanding of these pivotal points of change can help school leaders and instructional staff provide coaching support to each other. Once informed, these coaching conversations will ignite teacher self-efficacy and empower collaborative practices.

In an exploration of human performance, Bandura (1977) introduced the concept of self-efficacy beliefs as an assessment of one's capabilities to reach a targeted level of performance in a given endeavor. Tschannen-Moran (2007) wrote, "teachers' self-efficacy is a little idea with big impact. Teachers' judgment of their capability to impact student outcomes has been consistently related to teacher behavior, student attitudes, and student achievement" (p. 954). In schools, improving teacher self-efficacy is one of the means of improving teacher performance. As teachers' beliefs in their abilities improve along with their actual level of skills and use of best practices, their impact upon classroom instruction will improve. These increased levels of self-efficacy and resulting

levels of student achievements can be attained through instructional coaching conversations.

### **Background**

Throughout time, public education has attempted to find ways for classroom instructors to effectively met the needs of struggling students. These attempts have led to decades of school-reform legislation including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 which, like decades of reform before it, intended improve the quality of educational services (McDonnell, 2005). Unfortunately, the overall impact of these efforts has not been clear (Hursh, 2007). Despite decades of well-meaning and broad-based educational legislation, educators still struggle to meet the needs of students.

What has become clear is the fact that the most powerful influences over student academic achievement lie within the purview of quality classroom instruction. Teachers have the strongest impact upon learning. Hattie's (2013) work presented a clear emphasis upon feedback from teachers, quality of instruction, and direct instruction as the top three most effective strategies that fall under the control of public education (p. 190). The positive impact that quality teaching has upon student achievement is indisputable. The next challenge for school leaders is to find ways to support strong classroom instruction and intervene in those classrooms where quality instruction is not taking place.

Public schools have become notorious for test-driving costly programs and complying with competing regulations in an attempt to improve student achievement. Teachers spend long hours in professional development classes attempting to learn new strategies and looking for that one thing that will make the difference in their instruction. According to a study on professional development, teachers needed close to fifty hours of professional development to improve their skills (Darling-

Hammond, et. al., 2009). Gladwell (2008) calculated that it can take ten thousand hours of deliberate practice to master a complex skill. In the face of such a formidable need, schools need to look toward additional layers of support to help make the most effective and efficient use of professional development.

This is where instructional coaching comes in. Instructional coaching is one way that schools have found to support improving teachers' instructional practices in the classroom. While recognizing that quality instructional practices used in classrooms is the most significant factor impacting student learning (Xu & Gulosino, 2006), public school districts and individual schools within these districts have focused on implementing reforms that increase instructional efficacy. Denton and Hasbrouck (2009) identified two support services, instructional coaching and school-based consultation, as conceptually related processes that have become increasingly prevalent in schools.

Although these terms have experienced much use in the literature and in gatherings of school leaders, coaching and consultation are not clearly defined. Simply put, Aguilar (2013) explained that coaching occurs when "a more knowledgeable professional works closely with another professional to increase productivity" (p.17). Loosely translated, coaching takes place when a coach or consultant works directly with a teacher and typically the goal of this relationship is to change instructional practice in order to improve student performance.

Coaching and consulting are processes that school leaders are turning to to help meet the needs of their classroom instructors. Here, coaching and consulting are being used to describe the processes whereby a coach supports the thinking and understanding of a professional. Depending upon the models employed, the term coaching typically describes mediated thinking. Costa and Garmston (1994) referred to this process as one which, "involves systematic development and use of questions that solicit evidence, thinking and reflection needed for continuous improvement" (p.xv). Consulting implies the adoption of a lens of expertise; not only mediating the thinking of the

person consulted but adding to his or her body of knowledge. During any given coaching conversation, a coach may switch roles; first mediating thinking and alternatively adding to a body of knowledge. The decision as to whether coach or consult depends upon the specific need and path of any given conversation. A coach may start out in a coaching conversation with the intention of mediating thinking and then decide to switch to a consultant's voice as awareness emerges of a need to add to the consultee's body of knowledge on a specific strategy, pedagogical feature, or element of content.

Applications of coaching relationships can be diverse. Aguilar (2013) identified two types of coaches: (a) the facilitative coach which supports clients to learn new ways of thinking and being, and (b) the transformative coach who attempts to mediate the processes used by teachers to think through their instructional problems. Each coach interacts with the teacher in either a reflective manner (as seen in Tschannen-Moran, 2010; Knight, 2007), or with a diagnostic, prescriptive, or supervisory focus.

As school leaders employ various coaching applications or hire instructional coaches and consultants to support instruction, coaches and leaders are challenged to find specific conversation models to support effective change. Analyzing the constitutive elements of change in practice and coaching conversation models may offer some keys to help unlock these challenges; evoking change in practice among low performing teachers.

Among the most change-producing conversation models is one identified as reflective coaching. Reflective coaching is the sort of interaction that builds a relationship rooted in teacher strengths. This sort of coaching places high value upon the work teachers have done to get themselves into a classroom and then builds upon those strengths. It honors teachers' own contributions. Dougherty (2009) argued that interpersonal relationships create the underlying foundation for all consultation and coaching services. This sort of coaching is separate from supervisory conversations. Rather than coming through a lens of supervision and evaluation, it

focuses upon the needs of the teacher as expressed by the teacher. As Tschannen-Moran (2010) described this dynamic, it is the sort of conversation that, “calls forth motivation and movement in people, through conversation and a way of being, so they achieve desired outcomes...” (p.17). Coaching conversations that are reflective in nature are one way that teachers can be effectively supported as they attempt to change and improve their instructional practice.

### **Changes In Practice**

Every day teachers are asked to change and adapt what they do in the classrooms. Their students change, administrators come and go with changing expectations, standards develop, and we ask teachers to use ever-improving strategies to help students succeed. We ask teachers to change and yet we do not have clearly defined paths to change to recommend to teachers. Although school leaders have been attempting to work with this issue for decades, there is still no easy way to help teachers through change. Changing established and routinized practices and beliefs can still be a complex process with no clearly established or commonly accepted path to change (Hall & Hord, 2006). Guskey (2002) proposed that teachers do not change their attitudes and beliefs until after they implement innovations and subsequently see improvements in student outcomes. Gregoire (2003) found that even when teachers have been taught what to do and have full understanding that a difference in practice would improve student outcomes, they still don't change sufficient to sustain these practices. The challenge is not necessarily asking teachers to change their beliefs, but rather finding ways to motivate them to attempt changes in practice that can be sustained. Caplan and Caplan (1993) looked upon consultation as a learning process that can be termed successful when teachers experience a change in the fundamental understanding or conceptualization of a problem. The goal, then, of the consultant is to help the teacher change by addressing one or more of the four areas: (a) a need for enhanced skills, (b) a need for increased knowledge, (c) a need for expanded objectivity, and (d) a need for increased confidence. The work of Gregoire (2003) demonstrated that in

order for lasting changes of practice to take place, teachers' self concept must change. These are the types of instructional changes in practice that are supported through deeply engaging coaching conversations.

School-based consultation is a well-established practice for promoting instructional change that lacks a universal definition (Erchul & Sheridan, 2008). Although various consultation models have emerged, Frank and Kratochwill (2008) proposed they all follow a tiered problem solving process rooted in conversation. Therefore, prior to examining specific models of consultation, it is important to understand some basics about conversations and conversation models that can serve as springboards for teacher change.

### **Conversations That Evoke Change**

If the goal is to get teachers to change practice so that they can alter their beliefs, conversations need to take place in order to support instructional change. Penlington (2008) explained that conversational dialogue is a “central activity within many professional learning programmes” and as such deserved to be studied (p.1304). He also identified the central focus of a dialogue that fosters change as one that promotes contemplation which will then allow people to make decisions regarding action. This identification of the contemplation seems to be the root of a reflective conversation that takes place between a coach and a teacher. It is true that contemplation can take place in a solitary way with internal reflection as might take place through journaling, or it can also exist as an external conversation with others. Engaging in external dialogue asks individuals to “unearth” and reflect upon personally held beliefs. This act of excavating and looking at one's beliefs allows individuals to see the difference between one's beliefs about their actions and their actualized behaviors. Self-observation of this difference, according to Penlington (2008) prompted reflective inquiry, allows for “insight into the various determinants that shape” practice, and creates opportunity for change (p.1311). This sort of reflective dialogue with the resulting insights is the heart of the consultation that supports changes in practice. Getting to this point in a coaching conversation is a

worthy and obtainable goal. Assessing how teachers, coached under different models, arrive at that point holds valuable information. It is the sort of information that can instruct school leaders in the specific steps and practices that can evoke lasting changes in instructional practice that will ultimately support improved student achievement while at the same time delivering higher levels of teacher self-efficacy.

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