FROM COLLEAGUE TO COACH

Transitioning Within a Campus

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Abstract: Instructional coaching has become increasingly important as school districts depend on the coaches' support through continuous, on-site professional development, both general and subject-specific, to increase teacher capacity, thus resulting in student achievement. Research suggests teachers are more successful preparing their students when intensive support is provided. Based upon the general principles of instructional coaching as described by Jim Knight and his colleagues at the Center for Research on Learning of the University of Kansas, the author considered what administrators should look for when hiring an instructional coach, two types of coaching models, the need for instructional coaches, and the roles of an instructional coach. The author also surveyed principals in one school district with the intent of identifying the number of instructional coaches who transitioned from a teacher to an instructional coach on the same campus. The surveys revealed that the majority of instructional coaches were hired from within the same building. In addition to the survey distribution and collection, the author mined a personal journal and social media posts to glean observational data about the transition from colleague to coach, and the article focuses on tips for instructional coaches based on personal experiences.

Keywords: instructional coach, teacher capacity, student achievement, professional development

Most of us would agree that teachers' jobs are rewarding, yet daily challenges such as student-teacher ratio, understanding cultural diversity, differentiated instruction for individual student needs, and special populations in a classroom leave little to no time to participate in their own professional development. The most common of traditional professional development approaches in which teachers attend a one- or two-day training and then are expected to implement what was learned is not effective. As Knight (2007) states, "Teachers often resist change programs that offer too little support" (p. 94).

With the many goals that teachers must fulfill on any given day, they feel rushed and overwhelmed. This will lead to many teachers not knowing what content to focus on because they "have too much to cover" or attempt to rush through the lesson so they do not fall behind on their lessons. According to Knight (2007), instructional coaches can "help teachers sort through, prioritize, plan, and differentiate the content they teach in their classes" (p. 150). This will maximize instructional time, allowing teachers to enhance their understanding of the content they teach.

The Purpose of Instructional Coaching

Instructional coaching, a form of ongoing, evidence-based professional development, provides an alternative to the traditional, formal training model. Instructional coaches work collaboratively alongside teachers and guide them through lesson differentiation and preparation, co-teaching, modeling of specific skills and balanced literacy components, and offer feedback of observed practices in the classroom to improve delivery of instruction. This type of intensive support builds teacher capacity thus resulting in student achievement. "Teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling, and there is much research indicating a strong relationship between student achievement and teacher quality" (Johnson, 2016, p. 37).

So, what does an instructional coach do? The list is endless. No two days are the same. Just like teachers, instructional coaches are flexible and differentiate their approaches for the teachers they support. A common challenge coaches face is where to start with a teacher. Knight (2007) suggests, "If instructional coaches are unfocused in their efforts with teachers, they can waste teachers' and their own time, and ultimately, they miss a chance to improve children's learning experiences" (p. 22). One must focus on the teacher's concerns and search for scientifically proven practices that will have a profound impact on the quality of instruction. One way to obtain the focus needed and to decrease the overwhelming number of teaching practices is to consider what Knight (2007) refers to as the "Big Four issues: behavior, content knowledge, direct instruction, and formative assessment" (p. 139).

Describing the Work of an Instructional Coach

In preparing to write this article and to provide a more immediate context for the practices I[1] describe below, I examined two distinct data sources. First, I surveyed a representative group of principals in my district to determine the hiring trends for instructional coaches. Next, I examined my personal writing and social media posts to identify major trends in my work during my first two years as an instructional coach.

To determine whether my transition from teacher to instructional coach in the same building was a common experience, I surveyed principals within my district. The hiring processes for 39 instructional coaches were identified in the survey responses. Twenty-nine (74.4%) of these instructional coaches were hired internally from campus teaching staff. Seven instructional coaches (5.6%) were hired externally from district teaching staff. Three instructional coaches (0.8%) were hired externally from another district. Along with the more informal anecdotal evidence I discover when meeting coaches from across the district, the survey confirmed that my transition experience is not an uncommon one.

[1]The first-person accounts included in this article are from the author.

In addition to the survey distribution and collection, I mined my personal journal and social media posts to glean observational data about my transition from colleague to coach. Analyzing personal reflections is important to improve one's craft. According to Donovan, Guss, and Naslund (2015), "Self-reflection is a critical process for the reason that it enables the decision maker to make strategic adjustments to situational changes" (p. 285). Through analyzing my Twitter account, journal, and PLC notes, I was able to identify what went well for me as a coach and what changes needed to be made to improve the support I was providing the teachers. These personal artifacts were analyzed for common themes and lessons for effective coaching practices.

My journal contains descriptions of coaching situations and details about email communication protocols. Aside from the agenda, I always included notes about the day's meeting: teacher concerns, positive "shout outs," goals met, and teacher requests for professional development. The first theme was the training teachers requested, my modeling of strategy groups, and guided reading groups. Since every classroom's reading levels vary from below grade level to above grade level, it was always a challenge for teachers to differentiate their small groups as needed. I researched best practices and trained and modeled for the teachers during the next PLC meeting. After sharing some research articles with my teachers, we would then walk together to our campus library. Whatever classroom was visiting, there was the group of students I used to model for the teachers. I modeled for several weeks until the teachers felt they were ready to model for one another. Since they all felt supported, the resistance to demonstrate for one another was minimal. I also have a link attached to my email that teachers complete when they need personal training or help. A few of the "shy" teachers used this link often, and I made sure to reply within 24 hours. This way, everyone felt safe and supported.

I also browsed through my Twitter feed as my social media posts often feature pictures that depict my perceptions and the insights of the teachers I coached. Viewing the uploaded pictures reminded me that my job was to continuously support the teachers so that we could all meet our campus goals. Collaboration was evident in the pictures. Whether it was a district-mandated training, campus-needs training, or teacher requested training, these educators were always working together for a common goal: student growth. Students working on the strategies the teachers taught them were also evident. Countless times, teachers would ask me to visit their classroom so that I could "witness" our work with their students. I always left the teachers a positive note after visiting their classrooms. My feedback was always specific. This let the teachers know that I was still holding them accountable for implementing the feedback received in their classroom.

Personal Practices for Instructional Coaches: What Worked for Me

When I started thinking about the characteristics of an instructional coach, I considered previously published research in the models of coaching (Knight, 2007), principles of instructional coaching (Knight, 2007), roles of an instructional coach (Devine, Houssemand, & Meyers, 2013), need for instructional coaches (Wang, 2017; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), and hiring of an instructional coach (Johnson, 2016). In the context of this work, I reflected upon what I wish I would have known before becoming an instructional coach. After two years as an instructional coach, I want to share my experiences with those who are or plan on transitioning from the classroom to the position of instructional coach, especially if that transition is occurring within the same building. There were several unnecessary negative experiences I encountered. I believe if I knew back then what I know now, it would have made my job easier. The following are the essential practices for communication that have helped me to be a better instructional coach.

1. "Let's establish norms together!"

Setting up our campus-wide norms for Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings and lesson planning meetings was essential in establishing a community of respect. According to Trach (2014), teachers will participate in meetings if "teachers feel safe and supported" (p. 7). As a campus, we made it a priority to establish a respectful community. The principal, assistant principals, and I asked the teachers to share their visions for our campus-wide norms. I was an active listener and agreed that all suggestions were important, but we decided on the five most important norms. Since the teachers created this list, they held one another accountable for following them. Before every PLC meeting, the grade-level chair randomly selects a teacher to reread the norms. Whenever teachers would grab that phone or iPad to check their emails, the meeting's "norm boss" would remind them of the norms or just point to the chart. Feelings weren't hurt. And the best thing was that I was not the one redirecting anyone.

2. "I'm not a snitch!"

Trust is the key to making any type of relationship successful in one's personal and professional life. In many of the professional articles I read in preparing this article, instructional coaches were commonly referred to as "Snitches!" Ouch! I have nothing in common with this term. I learned from the beginning that if I were to fulfill my roles in any classroom, I had to prove myself to my teachers. Since I had already taught at the same campus for two years, most teachers knew me, but I still encountered some resistance from a few. They knew only my smile as I walked down the hall or greeted them in the morning. They didn't know that I was trustworthy and that I was there to help them better their craft. I was not there to visit and then run back to the principal to share my observations. Yes, twice I have had to share my concerns with my administrators, but it was because children were not being treated and spoken to with respect. Our job is sacred. Instructional coaches want everyone to be successful. Our duty is to empower teachers with the necessary tools to improve one's practice to reach all students.

3. "I'm nobody important. I'm just your coach!"

Corporate America has a continuum of positions of authority in the workplace. The same occurs in education. Everyone has someone to answer to every day. There is a sense of inequality as teachers may develop butterflies in their stomach as their administrator walks into the classroom. Teachers should not become nervous when their instructional coach walks into the room. Rather, they should feel excited that their "partner in crime" has arrived. This was a challenge for me as teachers saw me as an authority figure, yet countless times I had to remind them, "I'm here to coach you, not evaluate you!" I felt more pressure in this position than as a classroom teacher. Why? I had to engage and entertain adults, learn alongside them, teach them something they might have not known before, and show them the same constant support that they give to their students daily.

4. "I promise! I'll come back!"

After a reading or writing conference with our students, we leave them with a goal to practice independently. We make sure to revisit that student and hold them accountable for practicing that goal in the hopes that it has become an automatic habit. The same applies to teachers. Consistency is important. Most teachers will do what is asked, but there are a few who will not, especially if they think you will not return. My first year was the worst. Learning the position and balancing my time and my numerous roles were challenges. I would model for a teacher in my coaching cycle, vowing to come back at a later date to discuss the session, and sometimes the return visit would not happen. By the time I would revisit that teacher, it was for something else. The relevant, timely feedback needed to impact the teacher's practice did not happen. Teachers started to ask why I was not going into their classroom anymore, or if I had forgotten about them. How could they feel as if they mattered to me if I was forgetting about them? Fortunately, my second year on the job was less frantic. I learned to manage my time and diverse duties better, and I was better able to debrief with the teachers.

5. "I'm learning too!"

I doubt there is an educator out there who has the answer to all the questions regarding education and children. There seems to be a misconception that instructional coaches know everything. That is so far from the truth. Teachers appreciate honesty, so numerous times my response to their questions has been, "I'm sorry. I do not know, but I'll find out." At first, I was afraid they would think of me as incompetent for the position. "What! This coach doesn't know?" When I shared my concerns with other instructional coaches about not being able to answer all my teachers' questions, I was surprised when most told me not to let my teachers know I did not have the answer to their questions. "You gotta say something!" they advised. I disagree. Teachers must realize that instructional coaches are learners too. Just as teachers use many resources to design their lesson plans, instructional coaches also search for research-based strategies to share with them.

6. "They're my kids too!"

Because I made the transition from colleague to instructional coach on the same campus, I know many of the students. Teachers might think I do not care as much because they are not my students. Yes, they are not "my" students, technically, but my investment in their learning is just as important as the teachers' investment. As the saying goes, "It takes a village," and I wholeheartedly believe it to be true. Our mission is the same: student achievement. Although my focus is supporting and working directly with the teachers, our common goal keeps us united. I have left the classroom, but student learning continues to be my mission.

7. "I'm just the messenger!"

Being a clear communicator is essential in getting any job done. I attend countless district meetings and professional development. Part of my job is to share that information with the teachers on my campus. District initiatives must be adhered to, so I must make sure I communicate those expectations clearly with my teachers. The ears I listen with at my trainings are not only for my knowledge. Just as we differentiate for students, I must keep teachers' learning modalities in mind as well. I need to make sure to jot down detailed notes for those teachers who need that extra support. All district goals must be executed with fidelity, and as an instructional coach, it is my

responsibility that the information disseminated is understood by all. Numerous times teachers and other support staff get upset or overwhelmed with the list of information I bring back to campus from the meetings I attend. Everyone needs to keep in mind that I am just following district protocol in attending these mandatory meetings and then returning to my campus to share the knowledge with them. They must not forget that I'm just the messenger.

The Commitment of Instructional Coaching

In all hopes, administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers can all reflect on the ideas I described. Ultimately, when instructional coaches are supported by the administration and viewed as partners by the teachers, increased student achievement is possible. Collaborating and working towards the same goals will promote a common language on their campus.

As I was reading the coaching literature and reflecting upon my coaching experiences to write this article, I continued to find validation for my work with teachers. It has reaffirmed my stance on the importance of supporting teachers within the context of everyday teaching. Students never stop learning. Educators, regardless of position, should continue to explore research-based strategies to impact student learning. Collaboration among all the adults in the building will facilitate that learning. Instructional coaching has become increasingly important as school districts depend on the coaches' support through continuous, on-site professional development, both general and subject-specific, to increase teacher capacity, thus resulting in student achievement.

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