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Introduction



Throughout the literature on school improvement is a consistent call to enhance teachers' content knowledge and instructional practice to impact student learning. Generally speaking, a recommended strategy to improve schools is to provide teachers with more professional development (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Elmore, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 1981). Schools and districts responded to this recommendation by providing teachers with various forms of trainings, but not all have led to a positive impact on student learning. To examine the impact of professional learning, several descriptive studies identified effective versus ineffective practices (Guskey, 2003; Hill, 2009; Hirsch, 2005). Three common findings related to the effectiveness and impact of professional learning have emerged from this literature.

1. Professional development is most impactful when it aligns to the prioritized needs in student learning.
2. Professional development engages educators and promotes deeper learning when provided within meaningful contexts.
3. Professional development designed to provide ongoing and embedded support leads to greater implementation of new practices.

When these factors are in place, it is much more likely that professional development will

systematically improve teacher practice and ultimately student learning. In contrast, professional development focused on ever-changing initiatives or practices, delivered in “drive-by fashion” without sustained and ongoing support, simply doesn't lead to systematic improvement in student learning—it leads to fragmentation of efforts and random impact on student learning.

In recognition of these factors, legislation contained in No Child Left Behind (2002) and its iteration the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) specifically outlines indicators of quality professional development. ESSA section 8101.42 defines “professional development,” specifically noting that the professional development activities are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused” (ESSA, 2015). This more in-depth view of professional learning implies that in order to impact student learning, it needs to be systematic and continuous, rely on data as an indicator of its focus and effectiveness, and be learning focused and collaborative in nature.

These specifications have led to a lot of forward movement in our field, particularly in how districts and schools approach their design and implementation of professional development. Yet, while these guiding principles have generally led to many improvements, we still observe symptoms of initiative overload and

delivery of professional development activities that seem random or fleeting. At times, the mere announcement of an upcoming professional development event is met with anxiety, sometimes eliciting responses such as “Uh oh, now what?”

Do teachers need ongoing professional learning to improve their practice? Absolutely! But they need access to professional learning that is meaningful and that aligns with students’ needs. And rather than having a revolving door of workshops that focus on a new instructional strategy each occurrence, teachers need time and support to implement those strategies. They need embedded opportunities and a meaningful structure to examine the impact of their practice on students so they can continually refine their practice. Moreover, teachers need to learn alongside their colleagues who teach the same grade level or course, working in collaboration to implement these practices and study the results.

In their foundational 1995 research, Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers conclude that there is little transfer from professional development

sessions into classrooms without the opportunity for practice, feedback, and coaching after teachers engage in this new learning. Michael Garet, Andrew Porter, Laura Desimone, Beatrice Birman, and Kwang Suk Yoon (2001) surveyed teachers who indicated that their practice changed most when they received professional development that was coherent, focused on content knowledge, and involved active learning. In 2009, Ruth Chung Wei, Linda Darling-Hammond, Alethea Andree, Nikole Richardson, and Stelios Orphanos, in partnership with the National Staff Development Council (currently known as Learning Forward), identified the beneficial impact of sustained professional development (for example, study groups and coaching) on teacher practice and student learning because of programs of greater intensity, duration, and connectedness to the teachers’ context. As a result of these findings and recommendations, many schools and districts have been providing support from coaches in a variety of forms, including peer coaching, collegial coaching, cognitive coaching, and mentoring, among others. This is where *instructional coaching* comes in.

The Coaching Movement

Numerous schools and districts have established instructional coaching positions as a specific vehicle to provide teachers and collaborative teams with *ongoing* support while learning about the curriculum and effective instructional strategies. In our work around the United States, we have seen a significant increase in the number of academic or instructional coaches within districts and schools. The specific titles of these positions and actual roles they fulfill vary depending on the site or district context, but in general, the individuals serving as coaches have been charged with

providing ongoing and embedded support to teachers in order to raise student achievement. There are different versions of coaching roles, including how and with whom they interact at the school or district level. Depending on the context and expectations, instructional coaches may work with individual teachers, collaborative teams, or both.

One way the coaching role varies across schools and districts is the nature of the relationship between the coach and teachers or coach and team. In one role, for example, some schools expect coaches to work as an *expert*,

that is, someone with greater knowledge about the anticipated outcome. This might happen when reading coaches help teachers implement strategies to improve student learning in English language arts.

In a second role, the coach does not necessarily have greater knowledge about the curriculum being taught but must facilitate meetings and processes, almost in a management fashion. Finally, in a third role, the coach supports teachers and teams as they think through ideas and decisions, provides questions to encourage them to reflect on their practices and the overall impact on student learning, and chooses resources and ideas to support the teachers' work. In this last example, the balance of knowledge and expertise between the teachers and the coach is equal. Sometimes, the expectations for how a coach relates depend on the teacher or team needs, and coaches move in and out of the three major roles based on the team context.

We further define the nature of coaching by looking at some foundational work around the topic. In their study of successful schools, Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman (2009) cite four hats of shared leadership to define four major roles of instructional coaches.

1. Facilitating
2. Presenting
3. Coaching
4. Consulting

Using their terminology, a coach who *facilitates* may support teams by leading them through unfamiliar agendas and protocols. This coach may not have the same content-area expertise as the team members but has training on facilitation skills. A coach who *presents* typically is one who delivers content via some type of training. Garmston and Wellman (2009) use the term *coaching* to explain the role the

teacher leaders play when they take an unbiased view and help teachers and teams reflect on their work. They can support decision making, planning and carrying out instructional strategies, responding to data, and improving effectiveness of teams. These coaches might also seek out resources to streamline the work of teachers and teams in their classroom. Finally, Garmston and Wellman (2009) consider coaches who *consult*. These coaches typically have greater knowledge about content and skills teachers want to learn about. Rather than presenting new material, they work closely with teachers and teams throughout the implementation of new practices and ideas.

In our observations throughout numerous schools and districts, the roles of instructional coaches are not typically fixed on a specific approach; in other words, coaches are continuously shifting between the roles of facilitating, presenting, coaching, and consulting, depending on the context and the needs of educators they support. Yet, understanding how each role interrelates to support team work is crucial and provides coaches with a decision-making framework when approaching their work.

The increase in instructional coaching is an exciting and promising delivery model for schools to support the work of teams and impact student learning on a systemwide basis. But simply hiring more instructional coaches isn't the answer. We see three major variables impacting the effectiveness and ultimate success of instructional coaches: (1) capacity, (2) culture, and (3) context.

Capacity

If you are fortunate enough to have moved into a coaching position after having significant training and support, we congratulate you! However, if you are like many instructional coaches, you may have been assigned to your position having little to no training in

coaching strategies or clarity about the role. Although there are limited data, one study examined the frequency of training of teacher leaders and coaches within urban districts. Marianna Valdez and Alexandra Broin (2015) point out that “research from the Council of Great City Schools found that 86 percent of urban districts have teacher leader roles, but only 32 percent offer specialized training for the responsibilities that go with those titles.” Our observation as we work within districts throughout North America is that this tends to be far too common a reality for teachers hired in the role of instructional coach, regardless of the size or location of the district. They are often placed in the position because they are effective teachers, but the schools and districts provide little to no support or specific direction for their work.

Adding to this lack of knowledge about how to coach is the potential context a coach may find him- or herself in. For example, teachers who interact with multiple coaches at a school site may experience confusion about best practices, competing priorities, or mixed messages. Furthermore, coaches may be conducting their work without a firm framework or consistent vision for how to impact the school systematically.

Culture

The culture of a school to which a district assigns an instructional coach could impact the nature of the coaching or the approach. For example, if the district assigns a coach to a school because the school hasn't made significant progress toward accountability goals, this may result in heightened skepticism. In such a setting, staff may resist change or blame the lack of achievement on the school's demographics and its students. A toxic culture such as this could feed the impression that the coach is there to “fix” the school, making the coach's

initial work more challenging. Conversely, a school achieving at high levels could resist support from an instructional coach because staff feel they already know what they're doing and are complacent with their current achievement. In contrast, a school with a healthy school culture embraces the notion of continuous improvement as a way of doing business. The staff would likely welcome support from an instructional coach.

Each culture presents its own challenges and implications for how an instructional coach initiates support to its teams. Working with schools requires that coaches are attentive to the culture of the school *and* flexible in their approach.

Context

Schools bring in instructional coaches under a number of circumstances. Some coaches are directive, acting almost as extensions of the site administrator, building expectations with teachers, and monitoring whether teachers are using strategies. Still others are working with teachers by invitation only in order to avoid being viewed as evaluative in nature. Some coaches have one specialty area. For example, the literacy coach's focus is to empower teachers with effective practices to promote high levels of literacy; the mathematics coach's focus is to empower teachers with effective practices to support high levels of learning in mathematics, and so on.

Some schools have multiple coaches—for example, in addition to a mathematics or literacy coach, a school might also have a coach who supports practices for English learners or whose focus is instructional technology. Some schools don't have an official position of an instructional coach, but the site administrator provides the instructional coaching support. Consider the following four scenarios that represent common coaching roles.

1. Janice is highly trained in literacy strategies, and her students' achievement reflects their effectiveness. As a result of her apparent effectiveness, the district asks her to serve as a coach. It assigns Janice to four elementary schools in the district to share those strategies with other teachers. She works with each school one day per week. The fifth day is her prep day. During her sessions, she visits teachers' classrooms to observe or model literacy strategies and periodically meets with teams to train them in instructional techniques that support literacy or analyze data from a recent benchmark assessment. In addition, she works closely with the site administrator to discuss her observations. There is also a literacy and a technology coach within the school working with the same teams.
2. Mike is serving as a secondary mathematics coach, supporting a large middle school. He was hired specifically to improve mathematics scores in his school because of low achievement in this subject. He works with individual teachers and spends significant time modeling strategies in their classrooms.
3. Rachel is an aspiring administrator. She is currently completing her administrative credential program and is anxious to make an impact on

the school. She works closely with the principal at one site, and her work closely aligns to the areas of student needs. She has a general elementary credential and emphasizes quality instructional practices that go across all content areas.

4. Matthew is an assistant principal at the middle school. As part of his role, he will be supporting the history and social studies and the English departments in their collaborative work.

Each scenario has different implications. A school that supports its teams with multiple coaches, as is the case with the first scenario, needs to help teachers implement clear communication systems so they aren't overwhelmed or getting mixed messages. In the second scenario, the mathematics specialist will likely emphasize specific practices that support mathematics while working with teams but needs to ensure he reinforces schoolwide practices and expectations. In the third scenario, the budding administrator might be more general in how she approaches teams but should ensure alignment with specific content areas outside her area of expertise. In the fourth scenario, the assistant principal should work with multiple content areas and provide more global support. Successful coaches take time to consider the context of the work they are doing. They recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach won't serve the teachers well and differentiate their work based on teachers' specific needs.

About This Book

Coaching is a professional development practice that has the potential for deepening the implementation of powerful instruction so

students learn at high levels. Our purpose for writing this book is to provide instructional coaches and *anyone* supporting the work of

teams with a guide they can use to engage in the right work—a collective focus on continuously improving a school’s results in student learning. It’s intended to marry the important role of coaching with the powerful work collaborative teams must accomplish.

To that end, the book goes beyond simply providing a menu of facilitation strategies from which coaches or other instructional leaders can choose. Rather, the processes and protocols in this book are grounded in a consistent foundation and framework designed to impact a system—the Professional Learning Communities at Work® (PLC) model. The major architects of this model, Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, along with Rebecca DuFour, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos (2016), operationalized this process by embracing and enacting three big ideas: (1) a focus on learning, (2) a collaborative culture, and (3) a results orientation.

Various coaching models exist, such as student learning–centered, teacher-centered, or relation-centered coaching (Sweeney, 2011). Yet these common coaching models are often implemented within the context of coaches working individually with teachers. Within the PLC model, one in which educators work in teams collaboratively and interdependently on behalf of student learning, coaches can best impact learning within a school by broadening their support from an individual level to a team level. Therefore, we advocate a hybrid model: *a team-centered, student learning–focused model of coaching.*

PLCs frame the work of collaborative teams around four specific critical questions that ensure clarity about what students need to know and do, the evidence teams seek of their accomplishments, the high-yield instructional practices, and the instructional responses to data that ensure all students learn at high levels (DuFour et al., 2016). These four critical questions are familiar to many schools that embrace

the PLC model and serve as the backbone of the work collaborative teams accomplish, as DuFour et al. (2016) describe.

1. What do we want students to know and be able to do? (In other words, what knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?)
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

Notice that these questions are *we* statements, not *me* statements. The nature of this work is to build common clarity across teams about what they consider essential for student learning, to gather common evidence of that learning, and work together to support students who may struggle with attaining skills or require differentiation and challenge. These questions are also grounded in the mindset of taking action (DuFour et al., 2016). In *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don’t Learn*, Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Gayle Karhanek (2004) remind us that learning always occurs in the context of taking action, and that team members value engagement and experience as the most effective strategies for deep learning.

The instructional coach can play a vital role in supporting teams as they answer the critical questions and work in a continuous cycle of improvement. Use table I.1 to examine how instructional coaches can enhance the impact of teams through a collective inquiry process using the four critical questions of a PLC to focus the work.

Table I.1: Critical Questions and the Collective Inquiry Process

Four Critical Questions	Instructional Coaching Role Can Support
1. What do we want students to know and be able to do? (In other words, what knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?)	Support includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and pacing essential standards • Clarifying “end in mind” for end-of-year and end-of-unit student performance • Unwrapping standards to identify learning targets • Identifying effective instructional strategies that result in high levels of learning in the identified learning targets
2. How will we know if they have learned it?	Support includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing or calibrating common end-of-unit assessments • Developing or calibrating common formative assessments • Recognizing that a balanced assessment system has the best opportunity to gather the right kind of data to support students
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?	Support includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyzing assessment results to identify students requiring additional time and support • Identifying strategies for intervening with students who require additional support as well as those practices that seem highly effective
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?	Support includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying strategies for extending the learning of students requiring additional challenges • Designing units that embed differentiation

In this book, we define leaders in the school as people beyond the identified administrators. A true PLC operates with the idea of shared leadership because one principal cannot realistically be the only person responsible for guiding this work. Schools typically have a leadership team made up of the principal and assistant principal, team leaders for each collaborative

team, and other leaders in the building, including instructional coaches. Therefore, in some schools the coach or team leader might have greater influence on decisions than in other schools. Being familiar with the expectations around decision making is important in your role as a coach.

How to Use This Book

Make It Happen: Coaching With the Four Critical Questions of PLCs at Work[®] is designed to serve as a guide for instructional coaches,

teacher leaders, and site and district administrators to support the work of collaborative teams. It contains practical processes and protocols