You Can Do This! Instructional Coaches Influence Teachers

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As the teaching profession becomes more and more demanding, teachers now more than ever need constant feedback and reminders for why they do what they do. Instructional coaches are able to do that for teachers. Coaches can support teachers through initiatives teachers are already implementing in their classroom. Coaches can model lessons for teachers to demonstrate best practice strategies and skills that are needed for student achievement. Additionally, coaches can help teachers reflect on their individual practice. This article introduces how instructional coaches can support teachers; describes the role of instructional coach; and reveals data that shows how a coach influences both teachers and students. While teachers spend their days worrying about cheering on students and supporting student learning, coaches are able to do that for teachers. Instructional coaches encourage teachers – you can do this!

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Hiring and retaining quality employees is vital to the success of any organization, including an educational organization (Reilly, 2014). Schools have a plethora of employees that serve as support staff who ensure that learning will occur for students. There are also teachers who interact with students on a day-to-day basis to provide an authentic education. While students are the soul of a school, teachers are the school's heart. They keep a school running and ensure that learning opportunities are constant for their students. When schools are not fully

staffed, or when teachers are not fully equipped, then the organization cannot thrive the way it

needs to. Good teachers need to be supported in their practice and they need to be retained in

order to impact future generations of learners. Instructional coaching is one way that achieves

both.

Review of Literature

Instructional coaching is a fairly young concept in education. "The role of instructional

coaching emerged in the U.S. in the early 1990s" (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015,

p. 39). Historically, principals and professional development organizations have been charged

with supporting teachers and providing them with feedback. However, principals also play an

evaluative role and, more often than not, spend time evaluating a teacher's performance based

on a rubric, instead of providing them with feedback and opportunities for growth. That's where

the role of the instructional coach comes in. Coaches can go through the same cycle of

observing teachers, but instead of evaluating them based on a described set of standards, they

can look at the teacher's current practice and provide feedback to help the teacher grow.

Coaches can also model best practices and lessons, give teachers a safe environment in which to

practice strategies, and give feedback on individual goals. "Coaching can build will, skill,

knowledge, and capacity because it can go where no other professional development has gone

before: into the intellect, behaviors, practices, beliefs, values, and feelings of an educator"

(Auilar, 2013, para. 4). Of course certain criteria need to be met in order for instructional

coaches to have success.

Part of the coaching practice is that the right coach has to be chosen. Just because

someone can do something well, does not necessarily mean they can teach it well. Coaches

should be experts at what they do, but should also be able to share their expertise. They need to

be able to build relationships, be empathetic listeners, and have teachers and students at heart. Coaches can be described as "supportive, special supervisors…often with subject-matter expertise and designations such as literacy coach, math coach, technology coach, and data coach" (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011). Another characteristic needed by coaches is the ability to gain trust and confidence from the people they coach so their expertise and coaching is well received.

The role of an instructional coach can be defined in a variety of ways. Homan (2014) describes coach as someone who diagnoses a teacher, helps the teacher set goals, observes the teacher and allows the teacher to practice. Marshall (2015) describes real-time coaching that occurs while the teacher is instructing. Real-time coaching could look like whispering in a teacher's ear, slipping a teacher a note, gesturing at a student who is struggling, intervening with a noncompliant student, interacting with the class or discussion, texting a teacher, or talking quietly into a cell phone to Bluetooth earpiece the teacher is wearing. Lofthouse, Leat, and Towler (2010) describe a coaching cycle as "ideal" (p.17) if it includes agreed upon arrangements, pre-lesson meeting, observation of lesson taught and evidence gathered, and a post-lesson conference or coaching meeting.

There are theories for students and there are theories for teachers. Teachers need to be given just as much support as they give the students who they impact. One such education theory that can describe supporting teachers is the Communities of Practice (CoP) coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 and enhanced in 1998 (Eckert, 2006). Communities of Practice is described as "a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor" (Eckert, 2006, p.1). According to Eckert (2006), CoP develops ways of doing things and there are two underlying conditions: "shared experience over time and

commitment to shared understanding" (p.1). Teachers engage in communities of practice when they support each other and are committed to the education of their students. When teachers are part of a supportive community they are learning and growing in a safe environment. Coaches can instill a CoP when they share in the lessons and practice of the teachers they are supporting.

Situated learning is defined as "people learning through observation and interaction with others in a social setting" (Marchles, 2003, p. 23). Marchles (2003) uses the term schema to help understand situated learning. Schema can be described as the way someone understands and organizes what they perceive and how they respond to a new situation using what they already know. Within situated learning, individuals develop schemas and recognize that "learning is both a product and a process. The product is a change in understanding, or schema, and the process is the testing, building, revising and integrating of the schemas within a particular context of application" (Marchles, 2003, p.24). When teachers are reflecting on what they know about their lessons or their instructional practice and interacting with others to gain more knowledge and understanding that helps them to redefine their schema in order to improve upon their practice, they are involved in situated learning. This theory can also be used to describe a coaching model where a coach helps a teacher understand and reflect on an observed lesson and build new knowledge and practice to make improvements.

Apprenticeship concepts include "modeling, coaching, scaffolding and fading, to develop workplace skills" (Marchles, 2003, p. 26). Modeling allows a beginning teacher to observe an expert. It can shift the beginning teacher's schema to understand the bigger picture of what learning can look like. Scaffolding is providing levels of support to a teacher. It allows the beginning to teacher to try new tasks with the support of an expert and that teacher receives coaching and feedback that fosters improvement. Finally, the levels of support begin to fade.

The expert is still there to provide help when needed, but the apprentice is more comfortable and confident with doing it on his own.

A coaching model can be recognized within all three of these learning theories. When a coach and a teacher are engaged and share a common understanding of how to support student achievement, then they are involved in a CoP. When professional development and professional learning takes place in real context, the teacher's individual classroom with the real students the teacher supports, then learning is situated. Lastly, apprenticeship happens when a coach models instruction and then allows a teacher to practice, beginning with all the safety nets that are needed at first, and then removing levels of support as the teacher becomes ready. There are also other learning theories that support why instructional coaches are a vital part of a school culture.

Figure 1 Impact of Coaching

Coaching → Improves Teachers' Instruction → Impacts Students' Achievement
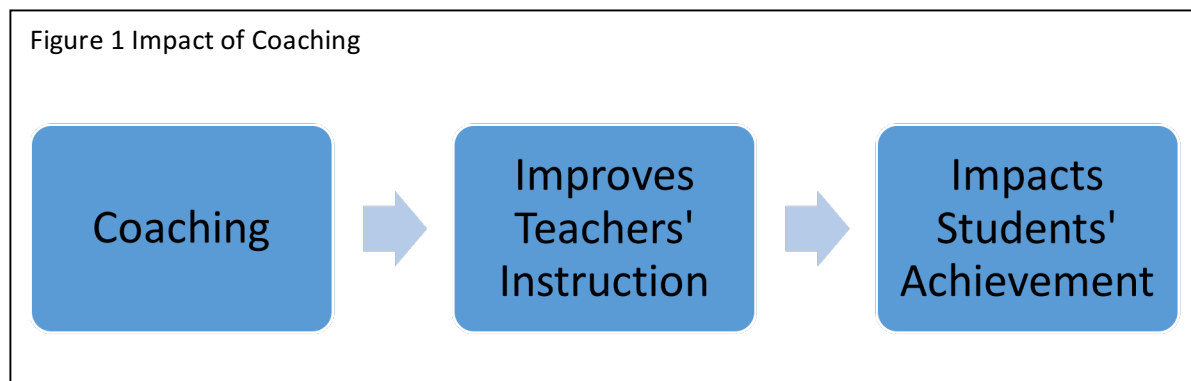
Data

Research has shown that instructional coaches have been able to influence teaching and learning of teachers as well as impact student achievement (Homan, 2014). The New Teacher Project reported that "87% of coached teachers met rigorous growth goals. One-hundred percent of teacher respondents said coaching improved their instruction. One-hundred percent of principal respondents said their school progressed over the year" (Homan, 2014, p.10). While

teachers have a common set of expectations they need to uphold "coaching invites all school employees to grow beyond those agreed-on minimums to more fully realize their potential and better serve their clients" (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011, Enter the Coaches para. 5). Coaching allows teachers to improve as learners which impact their students.

In a three-year study conducted by Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2015) coaches had "small on-average positive effect on student learning in the first year…more than doubled over the next two years. Three years in, students in Literacy Collaborative classrooms were learning 38 percent more on average than did their peers during the baseline year" (p.42). Lofthouse, Leat and Towler describe "teachers' learning and development underpins school improvement and provides a vehicle for raising achievement and attainment" (p.9). Biancoarosa, Bryk, and Dexter (2010) learned how coaches impacted student achievement in K-2 literacy. "The average value added during the first year of implementation represented a 16% increase in learning as compared with the average baseline growth rate. During the second year of implementation, the estimated value added was a 28% increase in productivity over baseline growth. The third year yielded a 32% increase in productivity over baseline" (para. 3).

In addition to supporting teachers, coaching also improves the relationships among instructional leaders in the school. "Coaching creates opportunities for trusting, open professional relationships to develop and these help to develop the school's social capital" (Lofthouse, Leat, & Towler, 2010, p. 10). When coaching is utilized as personalized professional development teachers are able to get what they need to improve their practice as well as improve the school climate. "Effective embedded professional learning promotes positive cultural change" (Auilar, 2013, para.8). When teachers form strong bonds among their

peers they are more engaged with their work and with the people with whom they work. This is one of the strongest arguments for retaining effective teachers.

The Gallup Business Journal (Reily, 2014) describes engaged employees as those who are willing to go the extra mile, work with a passion and feel a profound connection to their company. Engaged employees are vital to the success of an organization because when an employee is engaged there are significant improvements in customer ratings, productivity, turnover, absenteeism, and quality. Employees who are engaged with their organizations are more likely to keep coming to work and continuing to support their organization. In education it is especially important to support good teachers so that they can be retained; and retaining teachers saves money for a school or district. In the state of North Carolina teacher attrition costs an average of $12,500 per teacher, or $84.5 million per year (Zugelder & Daugherty, n.d).

Implications

While research has shown impact, both teacher and student, that coaches can have over it also lacks commonality across schools, districts, and the nation. "Coaching initiatives that were springing up so rapidly across the country were not all the same" (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 40). In order to carefully measure and compare the effectiveness of coaches, there needs to be some continuity in the role. Additionally, coaching requires time. Schools, teachers, and coaches need to include time in their schedule to allow for a coaching process. And, coaches need professional development to support them in their new role. Some districts are trying to figure out what that should look like and who should have ownership and leadership over the role of the coach.

While there is a clear understanding between how people who are highly engaged and who have strong and meaningful relationships with their organization can be retained, more research needs to be done to understand the specific impact instructional coaches can have on teacher retention. This article describes why teachers should be retained, but stronger arguments for how to retain teachers need to be developed.

Conclusion

Teachers need support. They need to feel supported and valued in their organizations in order to want to improve as well as sustain their work. Instructional coaches are able to fulfill both supporting and sustaining teachers. Instructional coaches provide learning opportunities that are personalized and differentiated to individual teachers and as a result, student achievement can occur on a greater scale. I am interested in seeing how the role of an instructional coach continues to develop within school systems over the next few years.

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