

Coaching as Leadership

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In the Greek “learning society” the primary function of society and of all its institutions was assumed to be to promote learning in the broadest possible definition. (Harmon, -170)

In the teaching profession, educators have significant differences of opinion regarding content, pedagogy and curriculum. In short, what, the how and the why of teaching are controversial. Is there really only one right way to teach mathematics or are there many appropriate pedagogical strategies that are context specific? What determines what strategy is appropriate when? Is a lecture never appropriate? Is cooperative learning always best? Does anyone really know what the appropriate mix of skills and conceptual knowledge is for ALL students? In addition there are conflicting views on how we measure our effectiveness. What do standardized tests actually measure? What forms of assessment should we use? In what ways does assessment drive instruction? These discussions frequently become dogmatic-- informed by ideology and fueled by frustration. In this article, I will suggest that coaches may be key players in leading the profession through a maze of contradictions towards more coherent and sophisticated teaching practices.

As a result of tensions, disagreements, underachievement in mathematics by many students; the underdeveloped practices and documented prevalence of fragile content knowledge of many mathematics teachers, there is a long history of policies that attempt to control teaching through mandates. Rigid pacing calendars and highly scripted textbooks or programs are examples. “The aim of constructing “teacher-proof” curricula, however, has turned out to be out of reach and based on a naïve conception of what effective teaching involves.” (Staub & West, p6). Policies are often built on the pervasive belief that a particular

program, set of curriculum materials, or pedagogical practice, if implemented uniformly across a school or district, will result, at the very least, in higher test scores. This view implies that programs are panaceas to remedy unskilled teaching. They are not.

Coaches may be key players in a sustainable and systemic approach that could elevate teaching as a profession and spread effective teaching practices far and wide. Coaches represent the possibility of widespread systematic study of teaching and iterative opportunities to practice teaching under the practiced eyes of skillful colleagues as a means to improve instruction. It is skillful, thoughtful instruction that improves student learning. “Even when curriculum materials specify lessons in some detail, a competent teacher still needs to adapt a given lesson to the context of the particular classroom and to the individual characteristics, needs, and backgrounds of the learners in it.” (Staub & West, p7) The role of coach therefore becomes a key role for the systematic study and improvement of our profession. It may become the position that can bridge research and teaching in a more timely and pragmatic fashion. It may become the role that can bridge administrators’ and teachers’ historically adversarial relations into collaborative relationships based on mutual purpose. Coaches may be pivotal players in creating and disseminating the mathematical and pedagogical knowledge needed to teach diverse student populations important mathematics. For all of these reasons, coaches are positioned to be leaders and must step up to the plate with full awareness of their potential impact.

Defining Coaching

Coaching is a very sophisticated type of leadership that incorporates a skill set usually associated with an effective school principal or corporate CEO. Fullan suggests that there are five basic components to effective leadership: moral purpose; understanding the change process; knowledge creation and knowledge sharing; relationships; and coherence making (2001). Coaches need to understand and capitalize on all five components. And they need to do so from a position of influence NOT authority as it is generally agreed that coaches should not be in a position of formally “evaluating” teacher performance.

Coaches need to understand the big picture and their place in it so that they can contribute to coherence making. If they come to see that they can impact what happens at the school level and at the district level, they will understand that their role is more than helping individual teachers improve their practice.

Many people think of coaching as giving pointers to an individual or a team to improve performance. This is only one small aspect of what a coach does in an educational setting. It is this narrow view of coaching that, in part, results in schools or districts underestimating what skillful coaches need to know and be able to do. This results in districts expecting skillful classroom teachers to leap into the position of coach with little or no scaffolding; or expecting literacy coaches to double as math coaches and maybe even science coaches without the requisite content knowledge.

Conceived more broadly, coaches must become conscious leaders spearheading a movement that significantly upgrades the practice of teaching. A larger sense of purpose is another key ingredient of leadership which when tapped “ensures a limitless source of motivation” (Harmon, 191) in both coaches and the people they work with. The work must be grounded in evolving theories of learning and teaching. Mathematics coaches must have or develop deep and flexible knowledge of mathematics and

demonstrate effective instructional practices that are held to the standard of robust student achievement. They must also be able to articulate what they are doing and why in ways that invite teachers to question their beliefs and practices.

Using Coaching to Upgrade the Profession

Coaches have an unprecedented opportunity to join with principals as instructional leaders as both set out to upgrade the education profession. Though most of the leadership literature focuses on principals, it is increasingly clear that principals alone cannot improve classroom practice, particularly in mathematics, especially at the secondary level. Most principals were not mathematics teachers and many principals, like many American adults dislike mathematics and have weak conceptual knowledge of the subject. It is safe to say *knowledge creation and knowledge sharing* in mathematics, two of Fullan’s criteria for leaders, would be difficult at best for many principals. Couple the lack of knowledge with a negative attitude, limiting beliefs about the applicability and beauty of the subject, and you are likely to find that principals can be part of the reason that math instruction continues to look a lot like it did before the standards movement. One result of principals attempting to lead mathematics instruction without support is that now mathematics classes may have the trappings associated with the standards movement such as students sitting in groups, manipulatives or calculators visible, but the tasks are shallow, the instruction whole group and predominantly explanatory. The further up the grades one goes, the more knowledge is required to assess the competency of mathematics teaching. While a principal can create an environment for rigorous professional standards and can learn about and foster the elements of good instruction, when it comes to assessing the quality of the mathematics content being taught, many principals need assistance. A skillful coach can both provide that assistance to the principal and deepen the pedagogical content knowledge that teachers need to improve instruction.

Coaches are Curious, Humble and Persistent Learners

Douglas Reeves states, “...intellectual curiosity and learning perspective define the resilience continuum between learning and leadership” (Reeves, p 53) and stresses that leaders must be learners. They need to pay attention to the feedback and data that they are receiving in response to their actions and make adjustments based on their mistakes. If leaders took a learning stance, they would come to see that you can’t mandate content knowledge or pedagogical content knowledge, which is what is usually lacking when students are not learning the mathematics teachers are doing their best to teach. Compliance is not what is needed for improvement, increasing the knowledge base and rethinking the underlying assumptions guiding practice are. When principals understand that leaders in this age need to take a stance that relies on new relationships with their networks of employees, stakeholders, and communities (Wheatley, 1999) they are likely to see that coaches can become their allies in creating robust professional learning communities at their schools. This requires a level of trust that transcends the fear of appearing ignorant or foolish. “Because we can’t trust, we try to do by ourselves what can’t be done alone” (Harmon, 190). Principals can walk the talk of being “lead learners” by modeling the stance of “not knowing” which is the stance of a life-long learner. Life-long learning is one of the espoused goals of the standards movement. By modeling the disposition of “not knowing” all the answers, and taking a stance of inquiry or curiosity one is better positioned to be open in the search for solutions to the complex and paradoxical dilemmas we face in education today. In addition, one creates the climate for all educators at every level to have the courage to take a learning stance.

Coaches too, take a stance of inquiry and curiosity towards teaching and learning in order

to discover what is and isn’t useful in their pursuit of excellence. Sometimes it is our own rhetoric or preconceived ideas that limit us. “In fact it appears that *a vast number of persons would risk the destruction of civilization rather than risk fundamentally changing their perceptions of the world.*” (Harmon, 183) Coaches challenge themselves to develop deep self-awareness that is relentlessly honed through reflection and feedback. Aiming for open-mindedness is combined with finely tuned communication skills. Coaches must be articulate in expressing an ever-evolving theory of learning. Their philosophy of teaching grows more sophisticated as a result of working in diverse contexts. Coaches are catalysts for intelligent, informed, experimentation (teaching as a science). They encourage and delight in the evolution of skilled practice that allows for individual creative expression (teaching as an art); and embody a persistent quest to improve student achievement. Most people upon taking on the mantle of coach need to develop at least some of the capacities listed above. Communication skills in particular are essential for leaders. If knowledge is to be co-created and shared, we need to learn to communicate in respectful, safe ways that go beyond rhetoric. We need to seek feedback— data of all sorts, good or bad, oppositional or helpful—and use it to inform our work. (Harmon, 1998) These skills can be learned on the job if the school or district is aware of the needs of coaches and have the capacity and will to support them in their development.

Creating A Learning Culture

Creating a learning culture in the teaching profession promotes learning in the service of upgrading the field in order to meet the six criteria of a highly respected profession as identified by Lee Shulman (p 516):

- “The obligations of *service* to others, as in a “calling”;
- *Understanding* of a scholarly or theoretical kind;

- A domain of skilled performance or *practice*;
- The exercise of *judgment* under conditions of unavoidable uncertainty;
- The need for *learning from experience* as theory and practice interact; and
- A professional *community* to monitor quality and aggregate knowledge.”

A learning-culture builds upon and adds to the knowledge that we have regarding effective instructional practices to meet the criteria of “understanding of a scholarly or theoretical kind” (Shulman). In his book, *The Skillful Teacher*, (Saphier and Gower) Jon Saphier delineates the characteristics and practices of teaching that constitute a scholarly approach to teaching. He argues that the issue is not that a theoretical body of knowledge doesn’t exist; rather the issue is that the practices are not systemically disseminated, applied, practiced, and refined, across the profession.

Coaches can cultivate learning cultures and simultaneously build a scholarly approach to teaching. For example, one of the main activities of a coach is to assist teachers in planning effective lessons. In Content-Focused Coaching, for example, coaches plan lessons collaboratively alongside teachers using a “Guide to Core Issues in Lesson Design” This is a research-based tool developed to inform this work. (See Figure 2)

The theory is that by using common, field-tested, tools we begin to chip away at the idiosyncratic nature of lesson planning that presently permeates the profession and establish habits of planning that incorporate what we collectively know about teaching and learning. In this way coaches strive to create a culture for “learning from experience as theory and practice interact.” (Shulman) Skillful practice cannot be mandated. It is cultivated through the study of instructional practices that have a positive impact on student understanding. The fledgling role of instructional content coach can provide

the missing link to systemic excellence in teaching.

The coach may co-teach the lesson or model some strategies for the teacher. In doing so, the coach is modeling responsible risk taking as a hands-on leader. The coach takes co-responsibility for the success of the lesson as measured by the level of student understanding. He or she works to develop lessons that will meet the needs of students, and plant the seeds of essential habits of lesson planning in the teacher’s growing garden of practice. In this way the coach is planting the seeds of coherence as more and more teachers internalize the guiding questions used to design effective lessons. This work cannot be “mandated.” It is cultivated by engaging in ways that help people change their world.

Figure 2

Guide to Core Issues in Mathematics Lesson Design (Abridged)

What is the mathematics in this lesson? (i.e., make the lesson goals explicit)

- What is your goal or goals?
- What are the mathematics concepts?
- Are there specific strategies being developed? Explain.
- What skills are being taught in this lesson (applications, practice)?
- What tools are needed (e.g., calculators, rulers, protractors, pattern blocks, cubes)?

Where does this lesson fall in this unit and why? (i.e., clarify the relationship between the lesson and the curriculum)

What are students’ prior knowledge and difficulties?

- What relevant concepts have already been explored with this class?
- What strategies does this lesson build on?
- What can you identify or predict students may find difficult or confusing or have misconceptions about?

- What ideas might students begin to express and what language might they use?

How does the lesson help students reach the goals? (i.e., think through the implementation of the lesson)

- What grouping structure will you use and why?
- What opening question do you have in mind?
- How do you plan to present the tasks or problems?
- What model, manipulative, or visual will you use?
- What activities will move the students toward the stated goals?
- In what ways will students make their mathematical thinking
- What will the students say or do that will demonstrate their learning?
- How will you ensure that students are talking with and listening to one another about important mathematics in an atmosphere of mutual respect?
- How will you ensure that the ideas being grappled with will be highlighted and clarified?
- What extensions or challenges will you provide for students who are ready for them?
- How much time do you predict will be needed for each part of the lessons?

(Staub, F. C., West, L. & Bickel, D. D. (2003) What is Content-Focused Coaching? In West, L. & F. C. Staub, *Content-Focused Coaching: Transforming Mathematics Lessons*, (p. 1-17). Heinemann,)

Coaches Monitor Quality and Aggregate Knowledge

There is no, “one proven way” to teach effectively. What practitioners need to develop is informed situational judgment under conditions

of complexity and uncertainty (Shulman). This judgment needs to be informed by the aggregate knowledge of the teaching profession (Shulman) and the research that has been done regarding effective teaching practices (Saphier). Coaches foster professional learning communities to “monitor quality and aggregate knowledge” (Shulman) when they bring teachers together to plan, observe, and reflect on lessons. When teachers come together regularly to plan lessons, watch each other teach and reflect on teaching and learning together, they develop professional habits that eventually become norms. In professional learning communities, people talk with each other about hard issues; develop the skill to go beyond rhetorical stances and dive deeply into the nuances of the art and science of teaching. Coaches could be the professionals who not only help educators hone their craft and expand their repertoire of effective pedagogical practices, they could also co-create new knowledge and spread the seeds of innovation across the educational community through iterative processes like the ones described above. In this way, they are leaders who meet several of Fullan’s identified aforementioned criteria.

Coaching is Relationship Dependent

A coach understands that healthy, productive school environments are relationship dependent, people-friendly, life-affirming places. Leadership from a coaching perspective starts from the premise that people want to do a good job and are doing the best they know how to do based on their present beliefs and skill level. Coaching attempts to balance the needs of the individual with the goals of the community. Coaches work to develop a collaborative model of teaching that demonstrates authentic “cooperative learning” for students.

Excellent teaching is often attributed to the talents of an individual. One unanticipated impact of this “star system” of teaching is that an individual is recognized as an exemplar that others are supposed to emulate. However, it is often the case that the exemplar cannot articulate the specific practices that he/she employs and

often confounds beliefs and pedagogical strategies with style. Without an ability to name the pedagogical practices and underlying learning theory, it is difficult for others to emulate the practice. This “star system” unintentionally fosters a competitive teaching culture in which excellence is met with envy or excuses. It perpetuates isolation wherein it is safer to close the door and keep secret what one doesn’t know or isn’t skilled at. It is the coach’s role to transform an isolating “star” culture into a collaborative learning culture by helping people identify and experiment with proven practices in an environment of mutual support.

Coaches work in more than one classroom and often more than one school. They can be catalysts for teachers to visit one another and become more collaborative as they strive to improve instruction and learning. What matters is that the work is grounded in classroom practice, diagnosing student work, exploring and deepening content knowledge, examining curriculum materials; lesson planning and reflective teaching. This can happen one-on-one or in groups large or small. This is an iterative process in which everyone at every level is engaged in studying teaching and learning *as* professional development. Here is where knowledge creation and dissemination becomes real and has a lasting impact on a district. This is exactly what happened in District 2 in New York City. I was Director of Mathematics K-12 for about seven years. Though I left the district a while back and the district is now part of a large region with new policies, supervisors and curriculum materials, the teachers and coaches in District 2 continue to behave as a community of learners. I believe there is a direct correlation between professional engagement in learning and the continuing high student achievement in that district.

Coaches As Leaders Stay Focused on the Important Goals

Coaches help people “get smarter” about addressing the real, complex, and often discouraging aspects of teaching. They

understand that people, not programs, improve student learning. Programs, assessments and curriculum materials, are tools that can assist (or hinder) teachers in their endeavor to develop students’ capacity to think, reason, solve complex problems, and care. The tools in themselves do not guarantee student learning and no tool is a panacea that will assist every student in learning. It is through engagement with a teacher, or group of teachers, in the exploration, dissection, analysis and skillful use of these tools, in the service of student learning, that coaches upgrade instructional practices.

Coaches come to understand that the focus of the work must steadfastly remain on deepening teacher content knowledge of the mathematics being taught and the broadening of a repertoire of pedagogical strategies likely to give diverse groups of students access to important mathematical concepts and skills. A coach must balance this focus with an awareness of the pressures imposed on principals and teachers to improve test scores or mechanistically implement mandated curricula.

In our present political climate, many districts are mandating the use of particular curriculum materials to the exclusion of others and are often judging teacher performance on their compliance in terms of teaching a designated lesson on a date set by a district disseminated pacing calendar. This kind of policy can actually inhibit the capacity of teachers to meet their students’ needs and paradoxically can result in lower levels of student performance. Policies like these appear to be based on erroneous beliefs that effective teaching is a simple skill; all kids learn at the same pace and in the same way; and uniformity is the goal. These kinds of beliefs are prevalent in policies despite mounds of research to the contrary. Coaches must walk a fine line between helping teachers and principals meet unsubstantiated mandates while encouraging them to intelligently engage with their curriculum materials and keep their eyes steadfastly on robust student learning. This requires enormous leadership skill, not to

mention moral purpose and courage. . “Ethical considerations are inseparable from viewing things in a more whole-system way and recognizing the need for fundamental change.” (Harmon 156) Moral purpose goes hand in hand with seeing the big picture and is another of the leadership components identified by Fullan.

Complexity and Change

Coaches must understand the complexity within which they are working in order to appreciate the varied reactions and responses they will encounter. When people are under stress and feeling conflicted about the demands put upon them, they often react in ways that make coaching challenging. Understanding this dynamic, allows a coach to engage with compassion and detachment. Learning to take nothing “personally” coaches can allow complexity to invite them to hold the tension of paradox and to invent, experiment, observe, discuss, tinker with and reflect. (Wheatley) Remembering that, “only one thing is essential--the inner decision to follow the deep sense of purpose and to consider all else as feedback from a basically friendly universe.” (Harmon p 193)

Complexity requires an understanding that everything in a system is interconnected. When one action is taken in one part of the system it has unanticipated impact on the whole system or other parts of the system. Coaching as an iterative process involves gathering information for a more complete picture, and developing an awareness that dynamics are constantly shifting and demands are often contradictory. When coaches embrace the messiness of complexity they discover it is a doorway to incorporating more intelligent practices that just might result in higher test scores and deeper understanding. “The central tendency of dynamic, complex systems—and today’s world is certainly an example of such a system—is to constantly generate overload and cause fragmentation. Leaders need to accept this condition as a given, recognize its potential value, and go about coherence making while

also retaining the awareness that persistent coherence is a dangerous thing” (Fullan, 2001).

Coaches are Courageous Advocates

Coaches, like courageous leaders everywhere, sometimes must act as buffers between teachers and policies that sometimes sublimate good sense for political ideology. As a rule, public schools are not designed to address the daunting social issues that make the dream of educating ALL students seem impossible. There is pervasive anxiety in schools today that stems, in part, from high stakes, “big sticks” testing policies which are touted as the means for remedying the complex social problems we as a society do not seem to have the will to tackle outside the schoolhouse. Teachers across the country bemoan the simplistic or misguided policies that often shackle teachers and hold them accountable in ways that appear to some educators to be the very antithesis of what is needed to reach all students. It is as if policymakers are saying to teachers, “Stop holding out on us, and do your job.” It is absurd to think that if educators knew the answers they would withhold them. As a society, “we unwittingly “buy into” a belief system in which technical solutions are sought for problems that are basically sociopolitical in nature.” (Harmon 183) This can take energy that could be productively focused on upgrading instruction (something schools have control over) and focus it elsewhere, or it could be seen as fertile ground for the birth of professional learning that will translate into student achievement.

When educators are faced with policies they feel put them in untenable and compromising positions, they can become proactive and propose real solutions grounded in what they have been purposefully studying together. Teachers are generally too busy with the demands of teaching to focus on policy. Perhaps the coaching role can be one useful for informing school boards and other policy makers. In urban settings, the lead players and policies often change frequently with each new administration and too often educators end up

feeling powerless. Seasoned teachers become cynical and novice teachers flounder and flee. Coaches who work in this climate must understand that they have an opportunity impact policy.

This involves respectfully questioning the principal or district leaders and offering data that will help the administrators to see that their policies have unintended negative impacts. Coaches can come to see that “a challenge to legitimacy is the most powerful force for change to be found in history.” (Harmon p 182)

This is a delicate and difficult task to initiate in most of our schools. In my experience, many teachers are being asked to behave like mindless robots while expected to teach their students to become thinking and reasoning problem solvers. Coaches remind teachers that they are courageous adults capable of grappling with complex issues in multifaceted ways. Because they walk a fine line between improving learning and implementing mandates that may or may not be in the service of teaching and learning, coaches have a vested interest in impacting policy that will support the sophistication and evolution of teaching.

Coaches Work to Develop the Next Cadre of Leaders

Wise leaders find ways to mentor potential leaders so that the system can continuously be replenished and success is not dependent on any one individual. Coaches should determine the pulse of the system, in which they are working, in order to discover the leverage points for developing the next tier of potential coaches: teacher leaders. (Teacher leaders might be thought of as “apprentice coaches” who continue as classroom teachers with a slightly reduced teaching load and take the lead in collaborating with one or more colleagues at their schools.) Often the leverage points for building sustainable improvement are counter-intuitive in a crisis or reactive environment. For example, if teacher capacity is an issue (and it almost always is) then focusing

the efforts of a coach on a cadre of potential teacher leaders makes more sense in the long run than focusing coaching efforts exclusively on teachers who are problematic. Over time, the potential teacher leaders are more likely to become a stable resource for their schools. Time and structures can be shaped to allow them to support teachers who are having problems. The main issue is that coaching is seen as positive, even a privilege, and not something that is offered only to failing teachers. Another leverage point would be new teachers who often leave urban settings within a year or two. If coaches work with new teachers and help them engage in rich professional dialogue about teaching and learning, they are more likely to experience success and thus, more likely to stay. (Darling-Hammond, 1997)

Also, many systems initially hire outside consultants as coaches. While this may serve in the short run, over the years, the system must systematically develop coaches from within. Outside expertise will continue to be useful in terms of injecting the community with new information that disturbs the status quo and prevents the system from becoming insular. From the view of sustainability, coaching could become an interesting alternative to administration for those teachers who would like to become leaders but who do not want to leave teaching.

Like effective leaders, coaches seek to find the potential in people and contexts. Coaches encourage and scaffold them as they reach for new possibilities and try on new behaviors and ideas. Coaches understand that excellence cannot be mandated—it is cultivated. “Real leadership is helping the group to create a vision that is as nearly as possible in alignment with their individual sense of purpose, thus ensuring the motivation to achieve it without the need of external carrots or sticks” (Harmon, 1998). Coaches strive to create differentiated forms of professional engagement based on teacher’s aspirations and with an eye toward building sustainable capacity.

Summary

Coaches cannot realize this vision alone. The scenario I am creating here is a systemic, long-term, evolving process that challenges many of our present power structures and beliefs. When the vision unfolds, it will be common to see coaches, principals, teachers and district level staff working side by side in classrooms across the district; hear student achievement central in professional dialogue and witness robust learning at every level. Conversations informed by cutting edge research, outside expertise, data, and a relentless focus on improving instruction will flourish. Coaches--initially experienced consultants from outside the district—give way to coaches who are predominantly teachers who had been coached, became teacher leaders, and are groomed to take on the role of coach. Coaches play a pivotal role in helping teachers develop a repertoire of instructional strategies and more flexible content knowledge. Coaches also assist principals in their developing understanding of what to look for in effective mathematics lessons. In many schools the

relationships between and among teachers, coaches and principals are collegial, productive, and enjoyable.

In this manner, coaches are poised to lead the way in creating life-affirming professional learning communities on a wide scale that upgrade the teaching profession to one that is supremely qualified to valiantly and intelligently prepare the next generation for the rapidly changing, demanding, diverse and complex, global society of the 21st century.

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