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Instructional coaching for teachers: A strategy to implement new practices in the classrooms

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Abstract

There is increasing evidence that professional development programs, including those for teachers, are more effective when they involve intensive forms of support. Instructional coaching is a proven support to both teacher development and student achievement. A model of instructional coaching developed by Jim Knight and his colleagues at the Center for Research on Learning of the University of Kansas will be presented. The principles have been validated in studies of teacher professional development in the USA and in Europe. A systematic literature search on instructional coaching has been done in order to find the most relevant studies and reports. Instructional coaching for teachers is a collaborative, on-site, evidence-based approach, based on a close collaboration with school principals. The main strategic elements of the process will be outlined. A special section is dedicated to evaluation of the on-going implementation of coaching and the changing teaching practices. Evaluation of teachers' perceptions, instructional practices and the links to student achievement will be presented. Instructional coaching can support schools in implementing new teaching practices in a sustained way. Instructional coaching also ensures that teaching practices are realized with fidelity, ensuring systematic, high-quality implementation. The aim is to ultimately improve student achievement in schools.

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1. Introduction

Teachers have a rewarding but nevertheless challenging role. With increasing class sizes, the diversity of students in terms of culture and language, the changes in curricula standards, and rapid developments in teaching practices, to name but a few, they often have little time and energy to devote to their own professional development. The latter often comes in the form of one-day seminars with little follow-up, and teachers return to busy schedules, having neither the time nor support to implement new learning. There is increasing evidence that professional development programs, including those for teachers, are more effective when they involve intensive forms of support. Teachers often resist change programs that offer too little support (Knight, 2000). Instructional coaching for teachers has been shown to be an effective form of support providing intensive and differentiated assistance to teachers so that they are able to incorporate research-based instructional practices into their teaching.

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2. What teaching practices does instructional coaching cover?

Research has identified four areas of teaching practices that are likely to have a positive effect on the way that teachers teach and students learn (Knight, 2009). These are known as the Big Four, and provide a comprehensive framework for instructional excellence.

a) Classroom management involves issues such as teacher articulation of expectations for activities and transitions, reinforcement of students in aligning around these expectations, observing time on task with an aim of increasing student engagement, ratio of interactions in terms of teacher praise and correction, and provision of opportunities for students to respond to materials being learnt (Sprick, Garrison & Howard, 1998).

b) Content planning includes assisting teachers to create rigorous curricula aligned with national standards, touching on issues such as unit questions, essential knowledge, understanding and applications aimed at, and learning maps.

c) Instruction involves sharing methods for quality instruction and a range of practices to support different types of learning. Practices include effective questions, thinking devices, stories, cooperative learning, experiential learning, project-based learning and reflection learning.

d) Assessment for learning consists of sharing a methodology for guiding teachers in the creation and use of formative assessments ensuring that students can monitor and see their own progress and feel more in control of their own learning, and providing data which can help re-align instruction practices with results (Stiggins, 2005).

3. What approach does instructional coaching take?

Instructional coaching is based on a partnership approach, developed by Jim Knight and his colleagues at the Center for Research on Learning of the University of Kansas (USA). The principles have been validated in a study of two approaches to professional development, i.e. the partnership approach and the traditional approach (Knight, 2009).

The principles on which instructional coaching is based are:

a) Equality: the partnership is a relationship between two equal professional peers. The coach and the collaborating teacher add equal value to the coaching process.

b) Choice: the choice of what is to be learnt and how it is to be learnt is the teacher's. This ensures that the instructional coaching is tailor-made for the individual needs of the teacher and that the teacher remains in the driving seat of his or her own development.

c) Voice: in a partnership, each voice, opinion, perspective and point of view is valued. Teachers are encouraged to express their views about the content and methods being learnt, and to find their own voice with regards to the learning agenda.

d) Dialogue: as this is a partnership, one party does not impose or dominate. Partners engage in exploration and conversation, learning together. An open and authentic dialogue is created so that both parties engage in reflection about the material to be learned and applied.

e) Reflection: teachers are invited to think about and consider ideas before choosing to adopt them. Engaging in reflective dialogue allows teachers to become reflective practitioners, and to make considered choices about their teaching practice.

f) Praxis: after reflection and planning, the core of the approach is about putting learning into practice in everyday working life. The focus of instructional coaching is to help teachers to apply their ideas in the classroom as those ideas are being learned.

g) Reciprocity: all partners benefit from the instructional coaching process, the coach learns alongside the teacher and vice-versa.

4. What does the coach do?

Pushing for rapid change can alienate staff and sabotage efforts. For this reason, the coach spends time initially to create meaningful relationships with school staff and teachers, to learn about teacher and student needs, and work with volunteer teachers initially to build successes which will gradually spread to other teachers. Experiences in the USA show that once one teacher tries instructional coaching and another sees that it works, others come on board. The strategies being shared are research-based, and it is for this reason that they do work, and they sell themselves (Knight, 2004a).

4.1. *Partnership with the school principal*

In order that instructional coaching can best support a change initiative in the school, a combined top-down and bottom-up approach is generally used. With guidance, leadership and support from the top, the school can ensure a systematic uptake of teaching practices, ensure that national standards are respected, and that those teachers who most need support receive it. Obliging teachers to work with a coach often engenders resistance and resentment, leading to uncommitted or little effort on behalf of the teachers. For this reason, the coach works closely with the school leaders and in the first phase with volunteer teachers to ensure highly effective results, which encourages more teachers to participate.

The coach works with the school principal and other school leaders to implement school improvement initiatives and plan and implement professional development for the teachers. The coach supports the interventions which the principal wishes to focus on, and those that will have the highest impact on student achievement. The coach supports the principal in ensuring that those who need help can get it. In addition, the coach, together with the principal, evaluates the teaching practices being implemented to ensure they are having a positive impact on the students and the teachers.

4.2. *Partnership with teachers*

In the first instance, teachers are informed of the opportunities provided by instructional coaching, and teachers who are eager to undertake this form of professional development asked to volunteer. There are two steps in the enrolment phase that are usually proposed (Knight, 2007).

First, the coach makes a short presentation the opportunities that instructional coaching can offer for teachers' professional development and clarify the partnership philosophy which underpins the coaching. The aims of the procedure, and the way in which it works are outlined, as well as results seen in other establishments using this approach. Some time is left for questions and answers, and a hand-out summarizing the main points is distributed. An opportunity is offered at the end for teachers who may be interested to sign up using a form. As a second step, the coach has a one-to-one meeting with each of the interested teachers to build the relationship and to find what the rewards and challenges of the job are for them. The discussion centers on how the teacher experiences his or her job, what s/he sees as the students' strengths and weaknesses and what could be of most use to their own professional development.

The coach then works closely with individual teachers in identifying best teaching practices to be implemented in the teacher's classroom. For each teaching practice, the coach summarizes and synthesizes the practice to be shared, identifying the most important facets of the practice. For teachers to abandon old teaching practices and embrace new ones, the coach offers practices that are both more powerful in terms of results, and are easier to use. One of the roles of the coach is to make the new teaching strategies as easy as possible to implement, by providing each teacher with dedicated implementation support materials such as class strategies, class plans, repertoires of tools, and a "strategy box". The coach's role is to remove any potential barriers to its implementation, by simplifying and clarifying the practice and "translating" the standards and research into on-the-ground strategies.

The coach works with the teacher to create checklists and behavioral observation sheets which can be used by teachers in the model session (where the coach models the teaching practice in the classroom), and by the coach

when s/he observes the teacher in the classroom. The model lesson permits teachers to see how an approach will work in their classroom. Research has shown that teachers find this practice particularly useful when learning a new teaching strategy (Knight, 2004b). Typically the coach and the individual teacher meet once or twice per week for one hour, though it may vary, depending on the nature of the teaching practice being introduced, and the teacher's expressed needs. Each meeting focuses on the real application of the research-based interventions, and theoretical discussion is kept to a strict minimum. Each coaching intervention is thus co-constructed with the individual teacher to ensure quick and effective implementation and reflective teaching practice. The coaches are on-call to ensure rapid response to teachers' needs and questions.

5. Evaluation of the project

A combination of evaluation methods is used to assess the impact of the project at three levels: teacher perception, instructional practice, and improved student learning.

5.1. Teacher perception

Participating teachers are asked to complete a survey mid and end project covering the following areas:

- What does the teacher think of the coach?
- Which coaching strategies were found to be most useful?
- What contextual factors inhibited getting the most benefit out of coaching?

Teacher surveys rely on self-reporting, and hence have some limitations, nevertheless school leaders can learn a great deal through studying teachers' perceptions of the program.

5.2. Instructional practice

In addition to teachers' opinions of their coaches, it is important to assess the teachers' practices and strategies in the classroom, and how successful they have been in implementing them. From classroom observations as well as a meeting between the teacher, the coach and the school leader, the discussion focuses on the following areas:

- Are teachers changing their practices?
- Is the uptake of new methods of instruction increased by working with a coach?
- Is coaching improving teachers' abilities to use new techniques and strategies?

This will give school leader useful data to measure the coach's impact on teaching practice at school.

5.3. Student achievement

Ultimately, the goal of instructional coaching is to help students achieve, and while teachers' perceptions of their practices are important, the bottom-line is in how these enable students to learn more effectively. Making a direct link between instructional coaching and student outcomes is not simple, partly because there are many factors outside the scope of the coaching which may, during a given time, impact student achievement (Kowal & Steiner, 2007). Nonetheless, an attempt to measure student achievement can be done using tests of students on core competencies at the beginning and near the end of the academic year, and comparisons made between student results and progress in classes where teachers participated in the coaching project and those who did not.

6. Conclusions

Often the uptake of new teaching strategies is a complex change initiative for the educational establishment, engendering a fair degree of resistance among teaching staff. Instructional coaching can support schools in implementing new teaching practices in a sustained way. Instructional coaching also ensures that teaching practices are implemented with fidelity, ensuring systematic, high-quality implementation (Knight, 2011). The aim is to

ultimately improve student achievement in schools. The coach is an on-site professional developer who supports teachers in implementing research-based teaching practices by providing on-the-spot practical support to teachers. Since the coaches are on-site, they learn how the school operates and its unique culture, allowing them to adapt their approach to meet the unique needs of the staff, teachers and students in the school. Being on-site also ensures that coaching supports needs-based, real-time, on-the-job learning.

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