



Student-Focused Coaching: A model for reading coaches

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Growing numbers of classroom teachers and specialists around the country are being asked to provide support and guidance to their peer colleagues through a process called coaching (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Sturtevant, 2003). Coaching is quickly becoming a popular model in schools for providing job-embedded, individualized, and sustained professional development to teachers (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004; Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; Coggins, Stoddard, & Cutler, 2003). The rapid proliferation of reading coaches is happening despite the fact that little empirical support is currently available to directly substantiate the impact of coaching on student outcomes (Neufeld & Roper; Russo, 2004).

Student-Focused Coaching

In their comprehensive review of the available literature on coaching, the American Institutes for Research (AIR; 2004) presented a conceptual overview of coaching and identified four different forms: technical, problem solving, reflective practice, and collegial/team building. A fifth form of coaching not addressed in the AIR report has been labeled peer coaching (Showers & Joyce, 1996).

We have developed a unique model of coaching that is based in large part on the research in school consultation (Fuchs, Fuchs, Dulan, Roberts, & Fernstrom, 1992; Sheridan, Welch, & Orme, 1996; Zins & Erchul, 2002). This research—conducted over the past 40 years—has identified a set of processes and procedures that optimize the success

of the collaboration efforts involved in providing indirect services to students in various settings and circumstances. We call the model Student-Focused Coaching (SFC) and define it as “a cooperative, ideally collaborative relationship with parties mutually engaged in efforts to provide better services for students” (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005, p. 2). SFC is “student focused” because (a) its primary goal is to improve students’ reading skills and competence, (b) it incorporates data-based decision making with primary attention directed to student outcomes, (c) interventions are designed and implemented based on student assessment data and are highly individualized, and (d) the focus is on student strengths and needs and the results of interactions between teachers and students rather than directly on the need for teacher change.

SFC incorporates several aspects of the previously mentioned coaching models in a multifaceted and responsive professional model. Providing services as an SFC coach involves three categories of activities: *facilitator*—assisting and supporting the work of teachers, *teacher/learner*—providing and participating in professional development, and *collaborative problem solver*—systematically addressing school-based concerns about individual or groups of students or systemic issues such as curriculum or scheduling decisions.

To engage in collaborative problem solving, we (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005) described how a coach can employ a multiphase process called “systematic problem solving for collaborative planning” (p. 39) to help teachers develop plans to address their students’ academic and behavioral concerns.

In this role, a coach works in partnership with one or more teachers to address an identified concern such as a student's lack of progress in acquiring a specific academic skill (e.g., reading fluency), a student's off-task or disruptive behaviors that are interfering with academic progress, or a group of students' lack of success in applying skills to new learning challenges (e.g., difficulty comprehending a social studies or science text). AIR (2004) suggested that a goal for coaches engaging in collaborative problem solving is to increase teachers' understanding of how to address their students' behavior and academic difficulties, which can result in both increased student success as well as provide teachers with skills and strategies for preventing similar problems from developing in the future.

The SFC problem-solving process begins by having a coach help an individual teacher—or a group of teachers—accurately and precisely identify the targeted concern through the collection and analysis of data obtained from interviews, observations, assessments or a review of student records. From this data analysis the coach and teacher(s) formulate a problem definition (narrowing the scope of the problem and prioritizing concerns as necessary), identify goals and create an evaluation plan to determine if the goals have been met, and develop a plan of action to achieve the goals. Typically the teacher(s) assumes responsibility for implementing the collaboratively developed plan, with the coach providing support and guidance. After a period of time, as specified in the plan, an evaluation is conducted by the coach and teacher(s) to determine if the goals have been fully or partially achieved and what next steps should be taken.

SFC coaches avoid taking on the role of the “expert,” dispensing advice to teachers about how they can improve their instruction. Instead, coaches and teachers work together to overcome obstacles to students' progress; together they focus on the needs of the students. Through this process, teachers grow in their awareness of the effects of their instructional decisions on the success of their students and in their abilities to respond to student needs. Coaches learn from observing students' responses to interventions and instructional strategies developed collaboratively with teachers.

Current research on SFC

The problem-solving component of SFC is based on the substantial body of research on behavioral consultation. Reviews of this literature have demonstrated that it frequently results in the attainment of goals set in the problem-solving process, and teachers and consultants have favorable opinions of the process (Kratochwill, Elliott, & Rotto, 1995; Kratochwill & Van Someren, 1985; Medway & Updyke, 1985). The evidence base for SFC as a coaching model is emerging. There is preliminary support for the effectiveness of the approach in supporting fidelity of implementation of research-based literacy strategies by preschool teachers (Denton, Hasbrouck, & Mathes, 2005).

One team of researchers (see Denton, Swanson, & Mathes, in press) is currently examining the effectiveness of a technology application of SFC within a study of two small-group supplemental interventions for first-grade struggling readers. These reading interventions were previously validated in a randomized controlled study in six schools (Mathes, Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, Francis, & Schatschneider, 2005) and are being implemented in about 36 schools per year in the current study. Coaching is being provided to teachers delivering the interventions in these schools.

The technology-based coaching application implemented in the study by Denton et al. (in press), called The Virtual Coach (VC; The University of Texas System, 2004), is designed to enable an instructional coach to have data-driven interactions with individual teachers and groups of teachers. There is a separate version of the VC for each of the two small-group supplemental interventions under investigation. Each version consists of a compact disk containing video clips illustrating most of the activities and instructional formats in the intervention. There is also an interactive Web-based component that allows coaches and teachers to view the results of student assessments. The Web-based component also allows coaches and teachers to engage in conversations based on the SFC collaborative problem-solving model, with the goal of accelerating the progress of students who are not responding adequately to intervention. The study is beginning its third year of implementation in schools, and the researchers are analyzing student data from the first two years to find out

whether there are differences in reading outcomes for students of teachers who received coaching in the three different conditions.

Summary

There has been a rapid growth in the number of reading coaches working in schools to support the efforts of teachers to develop students' literacy skills. However, few of the various models or types of coaching currently being employed seem to directly link to relevant and informative research-based consultation. Our (Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005) model of Student-Focused Coaching is based on research and incorporates aspects from several types of coaching strategies being implemented in schools. Reading coaches who follow the SFC model can rest assured that their work is based on an extensive body of research evidence and is sufficiently multifaceted to cover the wide variety of tasks that coaches are typically called upon to perform.

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