Coaching for Instructional Improvement: Themes in Research and Practice

by Beth Boatright, PhD and Chrysan Gallucci, PhD
with Judy Swanson, Michelle Van Lare and Irene Yoon

This article summarizes major strands of research and pressing issues of practice associated with instructional coaching. Here we set the stage for the Spring 2008 issue with some background information on what is known, what is as of yet unknown, and some directions for future inquiry.

From left to right: Michelle Van Lare, Chrysan Gallucci, Irene Yoon, and Beth Boatright (not pictured: Judy Swanson)

A problem of professional development practice

Having an array of content-specific pedagogical tools enables teachers to develop all students' learning and ultimately see that all students – not just those who traditionally do well – have the intellectual capacity to reach and exceed high standards. Professional development opportunities exist for teachers, but rarely address these central issues directly, or in effective ways that impact what happens in classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Here we have an unmistakable problem of *professional development* practice: the problem of relevance. Teachers rightfully ask, "What does this professional development activity have to do with my daily work?"

In response to this "relevance problem," a new kind of support system is emerging. Aimed at bridging the gap between formal professional development and classroom implementation, instructional coaching has captured the attention of scholars and practitioners nationwide as a promising strategy for professional learning (Stein & D'Amico, 2002; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Stein, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2004; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Marsh, Kerr, Ikemoto, Darilek, Suttorp, Zimmer, Barney, 2005; Gallucci, Boatright, Lysne, & Swinnerton, 2005; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008). Here, coaching is based on the assumption that "close and continuing attention from an outsider, who brings new ideas and fresh eyes to the site of reform, can help school-based educators re-imagine, re-design, and renew their practice" in ways that improve the quality of all students' learning (Marzolf, 2006).

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About the authors

Beth Boatright, PhD, is a Research Associate at the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington (UW). Her recent research focuses on outcomes of professional learning opportunities in high school classrooms, which will be the topic of her forthcoming book, *Teachers' Professional Learning in the Context of High School Reform.* eeb2@u.washington.edu

Chrysan Gallucci, PhD, is Associate Research Faculty in the College of Education at UW, Research Director of CEL, and Program Co-Director of the Masters in Instructional Leadership degree. Publications include *Using sociocultural theory to link professional learning to organizational support in the context of school district instructional reform,* forthcoming, in the American Journal of Education; and *Converging reform "theories" in urban middle schools: District-guided instructional improvement in small schools of choice,* 2007, in Teachers College Record, with colleagues Michael Knapp, Anneke Markholt, and Suzanne Ort.

Judy Swanson, Michelle Van Lare, and Irene Yoon, are engaged in qualitative studies of CEL/ district partnerships that focus on the work of instructional leaders and systemic instructional improvement across multiple school districts.

What we know about coaching and high quality professional development

When professional development takes teachers' experiences and work contexts seriously from its inception, when it considers teachers as more than consumers of knowledge but also engaged actively in inquiry, and when it aims for professional growth and colleagueship, teachers are more likely to engage intellectually, socially, and emotionally with ideas, materials, and their work peers (Little, 1993). Simply, professional development that addresses the specific, daily needs of teachers and their students is more likely to produce changes in teachers' practice (Joyce & Showers, 1982). Furthermore, teachers benefit most "when their learning is reinforced over time through repeated and varied exposure to ideas and through interactions with colleagues, who can act as a resource for each other's learning" (as cited in Knapp, 2003, p. 121, based on Cohen & Hill, 2001; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). Coaching has the potential to accomplish this, if orchestrated over the long-term, and focused on ongoing collaboration between professionals around a common problem of practice that they deem important.

Coaching utilizes a variety of pathways to help teachers, school leaders, and district leaders build school capacity for sustained change and improvement (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Principals and central office staff, for instance, may use leadership coaches to guide their classroom walkthroughs or planning meetings. At the classroom level, instructional coaching might look different; it could take the form of one-on-one support for teachers, or guided observation and debrief of their colleagues' teaching.

Due to varied roles and responsibilities of the job, however, defining coaches' work has proven difficult for researchers (as summarized by Taylor, 2008). Most definitions of coaching offer general approximations of what coaches do, such as, "use conversation skills, listening, curiosity, compassion, expertise, and problem solving to help others move toward their goals, hopes, and dreams" (McNeil & Klink, 2004) or "nonsupervisory/nonevaluative individualized guidance within the instructional setting" (Taylor, p. 12). And, while ambiguous, it is possible that these generic definitions are the closest approximation to what coaches do, given the highly nuanced nature of the work. Coaching involves humans – in all of their individuality and unpredictability – who must navigate difficult issues of trust, communication, and inevitable differences of opinion.

Our observations agree with other scholars who suggest coaching can benefit educators by (a) promoting active reflection on current practices (Stein & D'Amico, 2002; Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993; Joyce & Showers, 1982), (b) teaching them how to apply new concepts to their unique work environments (Showers & Joyce, 1996; Neufeld & Roper, 2003), (c) building generative communities of practice (Showers, 1985; Lowenhaupt & McKinney, 2007), and (d) fostering professionalism among colleagues (Perkins, 1998; Garmston, 1987). Most important, good coaches maintain a humble stance on how hard the work of teaching really is. They reframe teachers' issues as part of a greater problem of practice that all educators struggle with: how to simultaneously push all students to their potential and cultivate their desire to learn.

Coaching in action

When skillfully applied, coaching can provide productive learning environments for educators, particularly when it relates to a larger reform agenda and is embedded in actual work settings (Showers & Joyce, 1996). The Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington has developed programs to support instructional leadership and strengthen content knowledge in over 20 districts across five states. Associate Director Anneke Markholt explains the Center's rationale for including coaches in their partnership work:

> We believe that if people just come and have their 'sit and git,' no matter how good the sit and git is, it's not real until you are side-by-side with somebody who can help you think through the skills and processes in your own site with your own teachers… You can't just have the [formal professional development sessions] without the coaching, nor can you have the coaching without the [professional development sessions].

While researching the CEL-district partnerships, we had opportunities to speak with scores of teachers, principals, and literacy coaches in Washington state about how coaching is enacted. Teachers mentioned that working *"right here with the kids, trying it on in real time"* was important to them:

> How to describe it—you're in the classroom. You're not watching a videotape of somebody teaching. You're right here in the moment saying, "Why did you do that?" … We're in the classroom, sitting down with a real student talking to them about their reading and then immediately going back together and sitting and saying, "here's what I saw," and "what did you notice?"

Looking ahead:
Questions for future research

While we know a little about coaching structures and some of its possible benefits, many questions remain. Not surprisingly, scholars and practitioners question the extent to which coaching shapes student learning over the long haul. To answer this, longitudinal studies of larger scope may be in order. And yet, an emergent strand of inquiry directs our attention to the idea of "coaching content knowledge." Educators are beginning to ask about the nature of what coaches must know, and how coaches learn to improve their craft. They are asking:

1. What knowledge is needed to coach teachers? What is the specific knowledge required to coach science teachers? Reading specialists? Algebra teachers? How much and what kind of content knowledge is enough for a person to become a coach?
2. What do coaches need to develop their own learning?
3. How might learning theory inform our understanding of how teachers and coaches engage in instructional coaching? (Gibson, 2005, and Gallucci, in press, provide initial examples)

Other questions involve the sustainability of ongoing coaching interventions, given its heavy reliance on human (hence, expensive) resources:

1. How long does coaching need to last to reach a sustainable level of continuous progress? Is there ever a point when external expertise is no longer needed?
2. How can such an expensive form of professional development be applied on a large scale? What about tending to immediate accountability requirements (e.g., WASL)?

None of these questions suggest simple solutions. As more and more school districts invest in instructional coaches to help teachers learn to teach all students to higher standards, a coherent, rigorous research agenda is needed to assess the impact that coaching can have on changing teacher practice. This kind of research agenda has the potential to strengthen our understanding of how coaching might ultimately shape the quality of teaching and learning in Washington's public schools.

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