
Guest editorial: Coaching for improvement in education: new insights and enduring questions

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This special issue of the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* (IJMCE) explores matters related to coaching for classroom teachers and school leaders. Specifically, the articles present research demonstrating how coaching improves instructional practice within classrooms and leadership practice in schools and districts. As such, the special issue extends current research related to coaching by considering how this popular professional development strategy can support not only an educator's personal learning needs but also broader expectations related to school performance. In addition, the pieces featured in this special issue suggest that coaching is a global practice, supporting significant reforms in teaching and learning in a variety of policy and educational contexts. Despite its expansive scope, however, the articles in this special issue suggest that coaching for improvement exhibits some common qualities.

Prior research: what do we know?

Practitioner publications have often described coaching as an essential lever for instructional improvement in school reform activities. Research has theorized that coaching exhibits the characteristics of professional development necessary to shift instructional practice in schools (Desimone and Pak, 2017; Gallucci *et al.*, 2010). Not surprisingly, instructional coaching has been the primary technique used in school improvement efforts (Mangin and Dunsmore, 2015; Sailors and Shanklin, 2010). Recent research has described instructional coaching in reading (Sailors and Price, 2015; Woulfin, 2018) and mathematics (Gibbons and Cobb, 2017; Gibbons *et al.*, 2017; Hopkins *et al.*, 2017). These academic subjects are often the focus of school and district improvement activities. There is some evidence that coaching provided in these subjects contributes to improved student achievement outcomes (Campbell and Malkus, 2011; Sailors and Shanklin, 2010; Sun *et al.*, 2014).

Coaching aimed at school or district improvement has received considerably less attention. The extant literature provides few published studies describing how coaches support change at an organizational (i.e. school or district) level. In one notable example, Lochmiller (2018) examined how leadership coaches assisted school principals in navigating the complexities of school improvement in two large urban school districts. The study suggested that leadership coaches were an instrumental source of support for the principal and helped them (re)frame improvement challenges in ways that resonated with classroom teachers and school staff. The majority of published research about leadership coaching in school improvement appears to come from the United Kingdom or Australia but seems somewhat dated (Harris and Lambert, 2003; West *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, more recent discussions have primarily focused on how coaches support administrators in becoming more effective and reflective in their leadership roles (Barnett and O'Mahony, 2006; Lindle, 2016; Silver *et al.*, 2009).

One of the primary objectives for this special issue was thus to promote understanding about coaching that has been (or can be) used as part of classroom-, school- and district-level



improvement activities. For example, research suggests that coaching improves teacher capacity (Joyce and Showers, 1981). Research also indicates that coaching is beneficial in various forms of leadership development, particularly for school principals (Lindle, 2016; Lindle *et al.*, 2017; Lochmiller, 2018; Silver *et al.*, 2009). Coaching has thus become an essential component of many educational improvement activities (Devine *et al.*, 2013). These activities include those derived within educational organizations (i.e. district coaching initiatives) and those offered by educational intermediaries (i.e. school improvement providers who provide coaching services). Yet, even with its popularity in education practice, the practice of coaching continues to be a relatively opaque and somewhat misunderstood professional development activity.

New understandings, enduring questions

Within this special issue, the authors and I have broadly defined coaching to include instructional and leadership coaching. By incorporating both approaches, we sought to bring together two bodies of scholarship that have developed along separate tracks. The special issue reflects conceptual guidance, which has argued that rethinking the complexities of instructional leadership necessitates looking across leadership and coaching knowledge bases (Neumerski, 2013). Throughout this special issue, the authors present various potential definitions of coaching across the six pieces featured. Yet, their work identifies some common themes that can be useful in defining what we mean when discussing or describing coaching for improvement.

First, coaching for improvement appears to be a contextualized activity located within specific pedagogical, leadership or organizational domains. Coaching for improvement is not generic in its orientation but rather bound to particularized understandings of what educators do (or should do) to support instruction and learning. As such, the context shapes what coaches must know and what support they must provide to compel specific practice-based changes. Coaching for improvement might be thought of as a mechanism that connects organizational improvement priorities with specific practice-based changes. By strengthening this connection, coaching helps infuse clear improvement priorities into the work of classroom teachers and school principals.

Second, coaching for improvement aims to inform educators' practice, their understanding of problems that emanate from it as well as the steps they might take to improve over time. While coaching likely increases reflection and efficacy (Cornett and Knight, 2009; Stover *et al.*, 2011), the articles in this special issue suggest that there is also an action orientation to coaching when improvement is the primary consideration. The intent is to foster a willingness to experiment, take risks and learn something new in a public space. These efforts may be enhanced when coaching is connected with a disciplined approach to inquiry, such as a Plan–Do–Study–Act Cycle, that stimulates a common way of thinking about improvement activities (Russell *et al.*, 2020). Thus, coaching for improvement should not be seen as a free-wheeling therapeutic activity but rather as a sustained effort to probe increasingly complex understandings of long-standing improvement concerns.

Finally, coaching for improvement emphasizes framing improvement challenges in particular ways. Coachees must be able to “see” the issues confronting them. For classroom teachers, this might entail framing issues about the content of their instruction, their pedagogical approach to presenting this information or the challenges of specific students or student groups. For principals, this might entail framing issues about the school as an organization, the needs of particular employees or teams, or the specific concerns of parents, families and communities. What matters is that the coachee can envision an improvement challenge in ways that.

Overview of the articles in this special issue

This special issue includes six empirical articles written by scholars from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and the USA. Their studies include both qualitative and quantitative methods. Before publication, each of the articles underwent blind peer review by two experts in their respective fields from the USA and Europe and technical reviews by members of the journal's editorial board. The final collection of articles reflects pieces that make an original contribution to our understanding of coaching for improvement. In keeping with the scope of the issue, the pieces address issues related to coaching classroom teachers or school leaders.

The first article, "Contextual Coaching: Levering and Leading School Improvement through Collaborative Professionalism" by Trista Holloweck, investigates how contextual coaching (Hoover and Gorrell, 2009; Valentine, 2019) can contribute to the development of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) in schools. Through a multicase qualitative investigation, the author examines coaching in two different policy contexts: Quebec and England. Her analysis centers on the notion of contextual coaching, an approach founded on mutual dialogue, joint work, collective responsibility and collaborative inquiry. The article provides a necessary conceptual foundation for understanding how coaching for improvement might occur in schools. Notably, the paper articulates some of the required conditions for coaches to engage in meaningful conversations that contribute to instructional improvement. Two conditions highlighted within this study seem particularly relevant to the broader examination of coaching for improvement. First, coaching likely involves some degree of joint work between coach and coachee. Second, coaching relies on some form of collaborative inquiry focused on a problem of practice. Importantly, this study highlights that these conditions contribute to teachers' sense of collective autonomy, initiative and efficacy and may ultimately stimulate conditions necessary for successful school reform.

The second article adopts a micro-analytic orientation and thereby investigates the discursive conditions necessary for classroom teachers to articulate a problem with their coach. Entitled "Representing Teacher Coaching Sessions: Understanding Coaching that Develops Teachers' Capability to Design for Learning," written by Steven Kickbusch and Nick Kelly, this piece seeks to describe representations for teacher coaching sessions by employing two approaches to discourse analysis. As such, this piece addresses a critical empirical consideration and makes a valuable methodological contribution by demonstrating the utility of discourse analysis to explore coaching conversations at a micro-level. Kickbusch and Kelly identify two discursive patterns – one that focuses on dialogue related to professional development and the other focused on collaborative design for learning to achieve a specific outcome. The latter of these patterns has particular relevance to coaching for improvement, where coaches and their coachees work in tandem to articulate a problem that is of mutual significance. A central conclusion of this piece is that coaches and teachers can work to address a common problem that, when addressed, will lead to improved instructional practice. By tracing the communicative acts that lead to this work, Kickbusch and Kelly offer a possible guide for programs and coaches seeking to articulate a problem that can drive instructional change thoughtfully.

The first two articles in this special issue elevate the importance of contextual knowledge in shaping coaching aimed at improvement. The third and fourth articles continue to articulate the importance of context by exploring coaching within two subject areas: mathematics and science. The third article in this special issue, "Instructional Coaches' Framing of Mathematics Reform" by Joanna Higgins, considers the actions that instructional coaches take to frame policy-driven instructional changes in elementary mathematics. Drawing from a qualitative study, Higgins finds that coaches use school and classroom contextual factors to help teachers articulate new beliefs about effective mathematics instruction. The education system and the vision articulated by the New Zealand Numeracy Development Project informed this vision. The article provides an important proof point for

coaches' knowledge and expertise about the context that shapes their work and contributes to systemic coherence in a system undergoing reform. The study has implications for how coaching might scale effective reform initiatives across multiple school sites, educational systems and national contexts.

The fourth article turns attention toward the effects of coaching on instructional practice and student achievement in science. Entitled "How does Coaching Influence Teacher Implementation of a Science Programme? Evidence from an Experimental Study," written Melina Furman, Mariana Luzuriaga, Inés Taylor and María Podestá, this piece discusses the results of an experimental study that aimed to understand the effect of instructional coaching on teachers' implementation of a science teaching improvement program. Their analysis sought to determine whether the effect varied in schools with different socioeconomic statuses. Situated in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the study compared teachers' use of educative curriculum materials with and without coaching support. The authors found that instructional coaching tripled the time teachers spent on science teaching schools with higher socioeconomic status and showed an even more pronounced effect on schools with lower socioeconomic status. Their findings suggest that coaching may be instrumental in shaping what teachers attend to within a reform context. However, their results also reveal the limitations of coaching. The researchers did not find, for example, that coaching influenced the quality of implementation of instructional practices dictated by the educative curriculum materials. For example, coaching did not lead to increased use of inquiry-based science activities, which benefit student learning. Thus, the article raises an important question about the kinds of professional learning support coaches themselves may need to assist teachers and other educators in implementing reforms.

The fifth article, entitled "Obligatory Coaching in the Context of the Model Project 'Talent Schools': A Means for Educational Equity and Improvement of Achievement Outcomes?" by Isabel Dean, Laura Beckmann, Kathrin Racherbäumer and Nina Bremm, discusses the work of coaches – referred to as improvement consultants – who participated in a six-year project that aimed to improve educational outcomes in disadvantaged schools located in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Their research suggests that the improvement consultants faced significant resistance in their work but adopted no particular orientation toward schools situated in disadvantaged settings. The article provides a counterexample that demonstrates what happens when the contextualized nature of coaching for improvement is discarded in favor of a singular approach that does not address the specific needs of the communities or schools served. Indeed, one of the striking claims from this study is that improvement consultants did not feel valued by the schools they supported nor felt that they acted with a sense of legitimacy in their work. This finding raises an important question about whether education systems can introduce coaching outside a school or district setting. In addition, the conclusions of this study raise important questions about the efficacy of the support provided by coaches as well as the potential to successfully influence local practice when a coaching intervention is replicated across contexts.

The final article, "I Thought I was Prepared to Do This: An Exploration of the Learning and Development of Leadership Coaches," raises important questions about the nature of learning for leadership coaches. Written by Kristin Huggins, Hans Klar and Parker Andreoli, the findings from this qualitative study suggest that coaches perpetually navigate the competing demands of their client's development needs and their capacity as leadership coaches to provide the support that meets those needs. Effective coaching requires that leadership coaches perpetually refine their coaching skill repertoire to support their coachee that meets their developmental needs. As the authors observe, coaches must develop their skills as relatively few coaches have supported individuals who are not their direct subordinates. Indeed, as the authors correctly observe, coach learning often happens over time as individuals become familiar with what works, for whom and under which conditions.

Thus, coaching should not be seen as a static practice that is implemented but as a form of inquiry that engages leaders and their schools in conversations about complex problems. Guest editorial

Charting new directions in coaching research

The collective findings from these articles offer the field of coaching research at least three possible directions. First, the findings suggest that more work is urgently needed to conceptualize and define how coaching in school improvement contexts differs from coaching practice aiming to enhance individual instructional or leadership practice. While coaching has often been framed as a one-to-one intervention, the increasing expectations for school improvement and the substantial public investments in these efforts necessitate rethinking how organizational particularities might require new techniques that have yet to be developed. Second, the findings note that coaching is not a panacea. Indeed, the results demonstrate that coaching interventions can fail when the coach adheres too closely to a model that does not directly serve the needs of the school being supported. In addition, variable coaching effects raise questions about how coaches adapt their practice to support schools serving unique student populations, facing challenges that are unique or multifaceted, as well as flexibility afforded to coaches who are working in improvement settings. Finally, the articles continue to generate interest in making explicit, empirical connections between coaching practices and organizational outcomes. Limited knowledge of coaching effects remains one of the most often cited needs of the coaching research literature and continues to be a significant need moving forward.

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