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Title

Commentary on the Special Issue on Instructional Coaching Models: Common Elements of Effective Coaching Models

Permalink

Journal

Theory Into Practice, 56(1)

ISSN
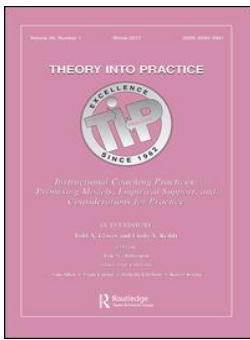
0040-5841

Author

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Publication Date

2017-01-02

DOI

10.1080/00405841.2016.1274575

Peer reviewed

Commentary on the Special Issue on Instructional Coaching Models: Common Elements of Effective Coaching Models

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Policymakers and educational leaders are increasingly focused on teacher performance and student outcomes, with the implicit assumption that teachers are fully responsible for their students' gains on critical high stakes assessments, particularly in reading, math, and science. The *Common Core State Standards* (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015) put increasing pressure on teachers to instruct in ways that may not align with their training, beliefs, and current practice. Hence, this special issue is particularly timely in presenting nine different articles focused on instructional coaching. There are some important differences in the underlying theories and aims of the coaching research and programs presented, but there are some important common assumptions and findings as well. In this commentary, I focus on the essential common assumptions and findings.

These are: (a) that teachers are responsible for their students' outcomes, and one can improve the way teachers instruct that will, in turn, improve their students' performance on standardized assessments; (b) that teachers should be empowered as part of the coaching program and that dialogue between coaches and teachers and, for some models, among teachers as fellow professionals, is more likely to make sustained changes in practice than more traditional workshop and lecture; (c) that observation and feedback are active ingredients of effective coaching; and finally, (d) a number of articles discussed the use of technology to increase the efficiency of coaching, which promises to reduce costs and improve scalability.

Teachers are responsible for their students' outcomes and they can change their practices so that student outcomes improve

The new *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, http://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn) continues the *No Child Left Behind* (http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml) focus on teacher quality and effective evidence-based instruction. The ESSA also

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continues focus on teacher evaluation, which gained prominence through the *Race to the Top* competitions (http://www2.ed.gov/programs/race tothetop/index.html). Teacher evaluation increasingly includes the use of students' learning outcomes as part of high stakes evaluations (teacher value-added scores) that affect teacher pay and employment.

However, there are multiple sources of influence on children's academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development including parenting (NICHD-ECCRN, 2004), community and parent socioeconomic status (Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005), and genetics (Taylor, Roehrig, Connor, & Schatschneider, 2010), which are largely beyond teachers' control. For example, Taylor and colleagues used behavioral genetics to partial out the influence of genes and teacher effectiveness. Comparing reading scores for identical and fraternal twins, they looked at gains in reading for students with more versus less effective teachers, based on teacher value-added scores for classmates. Taylor and colleagues found that when teachers were more effective, individual student reading achievement differences were explained almost entirely by their genetic differences. However, when teachers were less effective, less of the differences among children were explained by genetics. Students with less effective teachers failed to reach their full potential as readers.

In our studies where we used an instructional coaching model to support teachers' implementation of individualized student instruction (ISI) using assessment-to-instruction technology (A2i), we found that the effects of ISI/A2i accumulated from first through third grade (Connor et al., 2013). Students who participated in ISI/A2i classrooms all 3 years (first through third grade) were reading, on average, at a fifth-grade level. In contrast, students in control classrooms whose teachers received professional development and coaching on individualizing math instruction, were reading, on average, at a fourth-grade level. Although these are highly encouraging results, still 6% of the children in the ISI classrooms were achieving below grade level expectations (compared to 22% in control classrooms). Thus, even in the context of highly

effective instruction supported by professional development and coaching, there were individual student differences. This is important to keep in mind—in every article in this special issue, the authors made it clear that coaching should not be used in the context of high-stakes evaluation. Student achievement will differ regardless of the quality of instruction. What is important is that teaching be of high quality so that all students can reach their full achievement potential supported by healthy social-emotional development, including self-regulation.

Accumulating research shows that there are child characteristics × instruction (CXI) interaction effects on achievement—that is, the effect of particular amounts and types of instruction depend on the constellation of skills children bring to the classroom (Connor et al., 2013; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000). Hence, delivering the same high quality instruction may not be equally effective for every student in the classroom. This is likely why data-driven coaching that focuses on helping teachers use student data to inform their instruction is generally effective (see, for example, Reddy, this issue). In the articles that provided rigorous research that their coaching model was effective (e.g., Crawford et al., this issue; Glover, this issue; Hasbrouck, this issue; Ruzek et al., this issue), the coaching model included the use of observation and student data, with clear recognition that coaching that encouraged more responsive and dynamic instructional approaches (in contrast to one-size-fits-all approaches) were more effective. The clear message across all the articles was that teachers' practice can improve and these changes, in turn, support stronger student achievement, particularly when coaching and instruction are data-driven.

Empowering teachers

In all of the articles, an important common theme was that coaches were partners, teachers' opinions were respected, and that feedback was collaborative. For example, Desimone and Pak (this issue) described "collective participation"

where teachers meet in "community circles" as one of the five features of effective professional development. There is an important history of collective participation through communities of practice (Bos, Mather, Narr, & Babur, 1999), professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), and teacher study groups (Gersten, Dimino, Jayanthi, Kim, & Santoro, 2010). Kurz et al. (this issue) describe peer coaching as one of five coaching types. In her article on the classroom strategies coaching model, Reddy (this issue) states, "Teachers are viewed as active collaborators with coaches throughout the decision-making process" (p. 47). Hasbrouk (this issue) note, "The [student focused model holds] … that teachers' practice is best addressed by using a truly collaborative process in which both coach and teacher are focused on a jointly-held belief, need or concern" (p. 21). It has been suggested that teachers may practice and help each other with challenges as part of their common inquiry. The assumption is that such peer-supported learning is more sustainable, and more likely to lead to improved practice and stronger student outcomes. And there is evidence that this is the case. Gersten and colleagues (Gersten et al., 2010) demonstrated that teacher study groups improved teachers' practice in reading comprehension and vocabulary instruction with some impact on student outcomes.

Observation and feedback are active ingredients of effective coaching

Observation of teachers, coupled with explicit feedback from the observation, was an integral part of many of the coaching models (e.g., Crawford et al., this issue; Glover, this issue; Hasbrouck, this issue; Reddy, this issue; Ruzek et al., this issue). For example, Glover noted,

Relative to control counterparts, coached teachers and interventionists who received modeling, opportunities for practice, and *ongoing feedback* had greater increases than control counterparts in perceptions about their self-efficacy. In addition, they showed greater increases in knowledge and better application of data-based decision making

(teachers) or intervention delivery (interventionists). (p. 18, emphasis mine)

Providing effective feedback may be the most important, yet difficult, aspect of coaching for a number of reasons. First, coaches who are not sure of their own knowledge and skill may be hesitant to offer explicit and useful feedback. Next, coaches are not always good at identifying effective practices. For example, in one study (Strong, Gargani, & Hacifazlioğlu, 2011), expert teachers and principals were unable to observe and then differentiate among video clips of effective versus ineffective teachers, even when they had access to rigorous observation tools, such as the CLASS. Coaches' beliefs about effective practice may differ from teachers, even when teachers are highly effective, and thus their feedback may be less optimal. Additionally, many general practices, such as teacher warmth and responsiveness to their students, and their classroom management, which are the focus of several coaching models, appear to be necessary but not sufficient to improve students' academic outcomes. In a fairly recent study (Connor et al., 2014), we found that quality of the classroom learning environment (CLE, similar to the quality indicators on the CLASS, described in Ruzek et al., this issue) worked synergistically along with the amount of time spent in teacher/student-meaning-focused instruction to predict students' vocabulary and comprehension outcomes (see Figure 1). If very little time was spent in meaning-focused instruction, students made limited gains over the school year, regardless of the quality of the CLE. If substantial amounts of time were spent in meaning-focused instruction and CLE was high, students made greater gains than students in average quality CLE. Importantly, when CLE was judged to be of low quality, the more time students spent in meaning-focused instruction, the *weaker* their gains were.

One of our new working hypotheses is the lattice model (Connor, 2016; Connor et al., 2016). In this model, linguistic, text-specific, social-cognitive, and regulatory processes are reciprocally related over time, with synergistic and bootstrapping effects that interact with the classroom learning environment
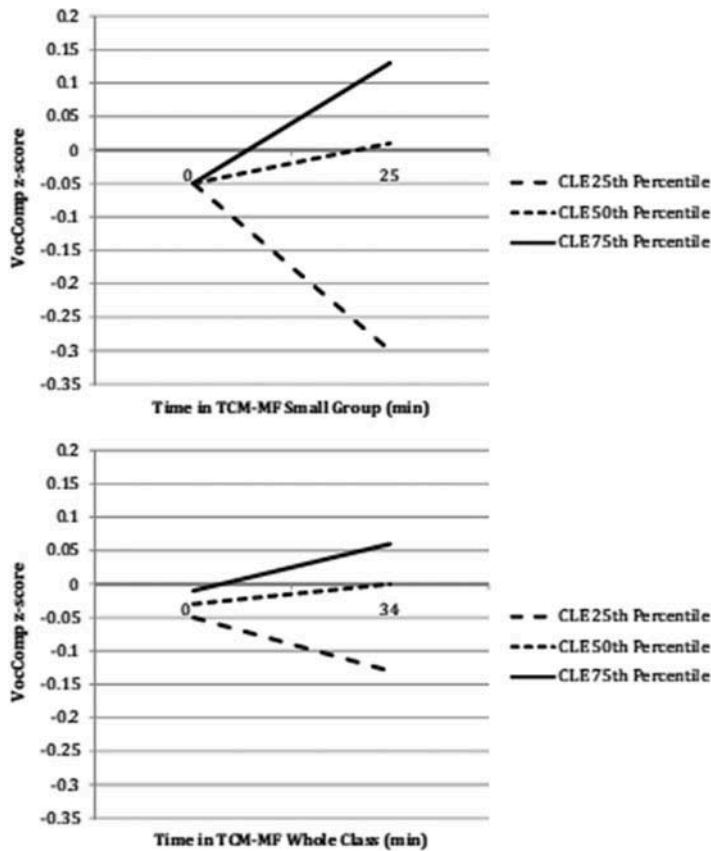
Figure 1.   From Connor et al., 2014, page 10.

and instruction to impact students' development—social-emotionally, as well as academically. Thus, a coach who focused only on the quality of the CLE and did not attend to the amounts and types of literacy instruction provided might not provide particularly useful feedback to teachers. In the same way, coaching that is only focused on content and time in instruction might not be particularly effective either.

Whereas some of the coaching models in this special issue focused on general practice, others focused on specific content areas, such as literacy. Based on emerging research, coaching to improve both general practice and specific disciplinary practice (e.g., math, reading, science, writing) is likely to be more effective than focus on one or the other, when coaching teachers to improve students'

academic outcomes. Additionally, as one thinks about using observation and feedback for teachers, models that provide clear aims and objectives are more likely to improve teacher practice and student outcomes. Without effective feedback, coaching is unlikely to be effective.

Use of technology to facilitate coaching

Some of the coaching systems used video-tapes of observations to facilitate long-distance coaching. For example, Glover (this issue) described his efficacy study where they used *bug-in-the-ear* technology. Teachers wore an earpiece and the coach provided support and recommendations while watching the live video-cast of ongoing

instruction. Crawford et al. (this issue) recently finished a study where they compared face-to-face and online coaching, and then compared both to a business-as-usual control. Preliminary results suggest that although face-to-face appeared to be more effective that online coaching, online coaching was more effective than no coaching at all. Other studies have shown virtual coaching to be as effective or more effective than face-to-face coaching (Powell & Diamond, 2013). For example, Powell and Diamond reported, "Onsite coaching sessions compared with technologically-mediated coaching provided more feedback on practices that extended learning objectives beyond whole group time and that focused on learning goals of individual children" (p. 102).

Most of the research on coaching my colleagues and I have conduced over the past 12 years has focused on using A2i technology to support teachers' use of assessment data to individualize their students' literacy instruction. Our coaches, who we call *research partners*, report that the A2i technology provides a focus for practice, observation, and feedback as a repeating loop. There are also online videos of expert teachers integrated into the technology. A number of the coaching models provide video of master teachers. For example, Crawford et al. (this issue) describe the CIRCLE library of video examples of specific teaching behaviors. My Teaching Partner (Ruzek et al., this issue) relies on videos of exemplary teaching to provide the foundation for providing feedback. Such video libraries can be invaluable because they provide models of effective teaching practices that are readily accessible.

Implications

This timely special issue provides nine valuable articles that describe different coaching models. In this commentary, I have sought to identify the similarities across these different models even though they differ in underlying theoretical frameworks and organization. The theoretical frameworks ranged from behaviorism, constructivism, social-cognitive, and cognitive

theories, to developmental and interactive theories. Organization and targets differed, as well. Freeman et al. (this issue) observed that coaches should be "system leaders" and work to improve student outcomes systemically from the district, to the classroom, to the individual student. In other models, coaches worked one-on-one with teachers focusing on specific classrooms and target students (e.g., Ruzek et al., this issue; Hasbrouck, this issue). A number of the articles provided rigorous evidence using randomized controlled trials to show that coaching changed teacher practice and improved student outcomes.

Accumulating evidence points to the efficacy of instructional coaching as a model for teacher professional development, and improving the effectiveness of instruction generally and specifically. Many of the articles in this special issue suggested that more research is needed, and I agree. At the same time, there is enough evidence to suggest that workshops and lectures are not as effective as well-developed coaching models. Teaching is a dynamic and demanding profession. Just as in medicine and other research-intense disciplines, in education, new knowledge is developing constantly. In the past decade, researchers have generated important new understandings about how children learn and the multiple sources of influence on both development and achievement. This knowledge has informed the design of effective instructional regimes. With ongoing research funding, new knowledge will continue to develop. However, if students are to benefit from new knowledge, there need to be better ways to bring research and evidence-based practices into the schools, which includes ongoing effective professional development for their teachers and educational leaders. As these nine articles clearly articulate, coaching is one of the most promising frameworks for providing effective professional development. Research, policy, and practice that explores the active ingredients of instructional coaching and the development of rigorous coaching models can help close achievement gaps, and ensure that all children reach their social-emotional, behavioral, and academic potential. At the same time, effective methods to train coaches will be required. Researchers know less about how to do this. Finally, coaching is expensive

and, although technology may increase efficiency, coaching is still time and person intensive. It is not clear to me that educators can provide inexpensive coaching and expect it to be effective, particularly in schools that serve the most vulnerable students—children living in poverty, children for whom English is a second language, and children with special needs. Rather, policy and funding should be provided so that effective coaching becomes ubiquitous and sustainable. In this way, we can fulfill the promise of ESSA and make sure every student reaches his or her full potential.

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