

PARTNERING TO FACILITATE TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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As the principal and instructional leader of a Kindergarten to Grade 6 elementary school located in a large urban school district, I actively promoted and participated in the teachers' professional learning. However, I could not conduct this complex work alone. Being fully aware of the power of collaboration, the school partnered with a learning coach from a university based research and professional learning organization. This professional learning coach provided onsite professional learning and online support to teachers to facilitate the design of authentic tasks for students, while focusing on knowledge creation and formative assessment through an emphasis on discipline-based inquiry (Friesen, 2009). In this article, I present some of my research, which documents how partnering with a learning coach positively impacted teacher professional learning. I also provide suggestions for the school principal to consider with regard to creating successful professional learning partnerships within the school.

The learning coach worked with teachers to explore student learning possibilities, challenge teachers' assumptions about task design, and question existing norms of assessment, while simultaneously focusing all conversations on students and their learning (Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2008). This external expert provided combinations of onsite, ongoing research-informed supports as she worked in collaboration with teams of teachers to design authentic discipline-rich inclusive tasks for all students. These supports embodied the following characteristics: authenticity, academic rigor, appropriate uses of technology, active exploration, connecting with subject expertise, and assessment.

Additionally, the learning coach supported me, as an instructional leader, to look at both teacher and student work as the premise to inform my leadership practice. Alongside the teachers, I, too, was as a learner eager to improve my own professional skills. For example, I sat in the planning meetings between the learning coach and the teachers, was an active participant in professional development sessions offered by the learning coach with the teachers, booked my own planning times with the learning coach to receive feedback about next steps, and emailed the learning coach when I had a question.

I recently conducted research into this partnership, wherein I was both an instructional leader and the researcher. I investigated the relationship between instructional leadership and teacher practice when an urban elementary school partnered with a learning coach (Cooper, 2014). I endeavored to gather information to understand how the teachers transferred their learning to their classroom practice and the role of the principal, as the instructional leader, in implementing this partnership. I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with the teachers from my

school in an attempt to gather information to understand how the teachers transferred their professional learning to their classroom practice. As part of the research, I also investigated the role of instructional leadership in implementing this type of partnered professional learning. At the time of the interviews, there were 23 teachers on the teaching staff of the school. Of those, 17 teachers met the eligibility criteria to participate in this inquiry. Nine of those eligible teachers (52%) volunteered to participate.

All teachers interviewed indicated professional learning time with the learning coach helped to improve his/her professional practice. For example, one teacher provided a specific example of how collaborating with the learning coach helped her in her planning. “[It] has helped me be able to identify the task for our project ... to really define what the task was for the students and what the expectations were from me, what I really wanted them to get out of it.” Another teacher articulated that he appreciated how the learning coach asked him questions about his task design. “[The learning coach] challenges you to think about your practice ... I like how she says, ‘Did you get what you want? How can you do things differently? How is it working now?’”

The findings in this study suggest that involving someone with expertise external to the immediate community was a condition connected with effectiveness and served to deepen teachers’ understanding of their pedagogy (Cole, 2012). The teachers’ responses in the interviews confirmed Robertson’s (2011) research on coaching—partnerships with experts provided opportunities for teacher learning and reflection on practice as the coach became the critical friend, questioner, and guide. As well, the ability to process the meaning and implications of new learning with one’s colleagues and the learning coach appeared to be fundamental to the change process as conversations grounded in evidence and focused on learning from the evidence influenced what happened in the classrooms (Earl & Timperley, 2009; Fullan, 2014; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Further, collaboration with the learning coach was also a chance for teachers to learn from their peers and share the workload, giving teachers opportunities to share best practices, build knowledge collectively, and receive advice from their colleagues.

Implications for the School Principal

Within any school, the principal’s direction in the area of teacher professional learning is critical to the creation and success of the school learning community (Anderson, Leithwood, & Seashore Louis, 2012; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000). My goal as an instructional leader was to enhance the collaborative community in the school by supporting the development of reflective conversations among the educators with the learning coach (Blase & Blase, 1999; Robinson, 2011). As Robertson (2011) articulated, professional learning does not just happen; these learning spaces must be creatively designed, practiced, and then modelled by the leader. The instructional leader needs to support the partnership, ensure the staff is ready to be involved in risk-taking, ensure time for ongoing teacher professional dialogue, and communicate leadership efforts to the larger community (Jacobson, Clifford, & Friesen, 2002). Additionally, because the learning coach is not present in the school on a continuing basis, it falls

to the instructional leader to help teachers translate their new understandings into practice and to sustain the professional inquiry process (Timperley, 2011).

However, instructional leaders who may be thinking of creating partnerships to improve teacher professional learning need to understand that, even when external experts are brought in to work with teachers over a period of time, success cannot be guaranteed. First, as Timperley et al. (2007) suggested, outside experts who expect teachers to implement the learning coaches' preferred practices were typically less effective than those individuals who worked with teachers in more integrated ways such as involving them in discussions and the development for understanding of their classroom contexts. Second, since funding is often used for the purpose of engaging external expertise (as is the case for this partnership), it is essential the right external expertise be selected. While the provision of a service is required (and it is understandable there are expenses attached to it), instructional leaders should acknowledge that the payment for the services of external expertise does not guarantee improved pedagogy.

Overall, because professional learning involves teachers grasping different content, learning new skills, and thinking about their existing practice in innovative ways, the teachers interviewed in this study indicated they would not have been able to successfully manage this level of new learning without support from the learning coach. Further, in this inquiry, the role of the instructional leader in promoting, advocating, and facilitating teacher participation with the learning coach ensured the successful use of external experts in this school and advanced teacher instructional practice.

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