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10-25-2017

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## Recommended Citation

Gibson, Harrington and McDaniel-Hall, Gloria, "Utilizing Principal Coach Reflections to Co-Develop an Effective Coaching Strategy in a Large Urban School District" (2017). *NCE Research Residencies*. 11.  
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**Utilizing Principal Coach Reflections to Co-Develop an Effective Coaching Strategy  
in a Large Urban School District**

**Harrington Gibson and Gloria McDaniel-Hall**

**Abstract**

Our Educational Leadership (EDL) program collaborated with a large urban district to provide coaching support for 15 principals. Principals were identified by their supervisor based on specific coaching needs. This collaboration allowed program faculty to design a coaching strategy. Utilization-focused program evaluation (Patton, 2008) was used to examine coaching practices that acknowledged the context, challenges and opportunities present in the district. Our interviews revealed the need for specific attention focusing on the first-hand experiences principals' encounter in the field. The importance of relationship building and trust informed a consultee-centered approach. A cycle of inquiry allowed for collaboration and refinement of the process. Strategies implemented during the coaching process informed continuous improvement for our second year of coaching support.

**Topic Descriptors:** Principal Coaching, Urban Schools, Leadership Development

## **Introduction**

Educational reformers and media reports are diligent in highlighting the problems faced in urban schools. The perception that schools are failing and must be closed as a result of low achievement continues to capture the nation's attention. Recent reform efforts emphasizing school choice, elimination of teacher job protections and increased accountability measures make the role of advancing student learning extremely challenging for school leaders. Concentrated poverty and racial segregation are rarely highlighted in educational reform initiatives, while these factors dramatically influence school success (Ravitch, 2013).

The era of accountability has greatly influenced the nation's perception of urban schools and researchers continue to highlight the important role of the principal in fostering school success (Blankstein, Noguera, & Kelly, 2016). While effective principals are instrumental to school and student success, principal turnover continues to be a problem. For example, one recent report found that 6 out of 10 principals leave before their fifth year, while data suggest that is the same time they peak in effectiveness (the Fund, 2015).

## **Purpose**

This research addresses the development of an effective coaching strategy for school leaders that draws upon principal coaching work implemented in 15 schools in one large urban district. Through this investigation we provide opportunities for year-long reflection to co-develop coaching approaches with Educational Leadership (EDL)

program faculty and experienced principal coaches. We argue that drawing on the perspectives of coaches overtime with opportunities to apply learnings to their coaching work, result in meaningful and relevant principal development. This is extremely important given critiques in leadership preparation programs that do not provide enough of an emphasis on field based experiences (Levine, 2005).

### **Frameworks**

Research that examines educational leadership programs have critiqued the preparation required of school leaders to effectively improve student learning. For example, a four-year study conducted by Levine (2005) found that educational leadership programs were deficient in the areas of meaningful curriculum, low admission and graduation standards, inadequate clinical instruction, and a lack of purposeful research.

While the issue of recruiting, retaining and developing principals has been a problem clearly identified in educational leadership research, there are studies that point to the effectiveness of using cycles of inquiry as a means of supporting principal development. For example, Knight et al (2015) addresses the key components of an effective coaching cycle. The cycle requires coaches to 1) identify an issue to serve as the focus of coaching 2) learn strategies that assist in building the needed capacity to address the problem and 3) identify benchmarks and evidence that serve as indicators for improvement.

Moreover, the research of Drago-Severson (2009) explores essential pillars of practice needed to effectively lead adult learning. Building upon Kegan's constructivist theory, Drago-Severson argues that leaders must understand the ways teachers learn to

provide opportunities of professional growth. The 4 pillars that support adult learning include 1) teaming 2) providing leadership roles 3) collegial inquiry and 4) mentoring. Opportunities to reflect and implement learnings from this body of research into our coaching strategy are useful to the development of the professional learning needed throughout the coaching process.

The research of Boyatzis, Smith, Van Oosten & Woolford (2013) explores the need to coach with compassion as a way to develop resonant leaders who are able to inspire and foster resonant leadership. This requires a relational approach rooted in compassion. By building relationships overtime, our coaching strategy allows for the enhancement of trust and compassion as the coach and “coachee” address issues that potentially impact leadership capability.

Our research focuses on exploring and applying effective models of clinical instruction after principal training. Since our coaching program will continue for a second year and there are ongoing opportunities for refinement, it is important that we deeply understand and assess its effectiveness. More specifically, our primary research question asks:

1. How can a principal coaching strategy be designed and assessed in ways that draw upon coaches’ experiences supporting context specific learning opportunities that develop and support principals?

Drawing from Patton’s (2008) Program Oriented, Formative Evaluation framework, our primary research question was broken down in secondary questions such as:

“What are the program’s strengths and weaknesses? To what extent are participants progressing toward the desired outcome? What kinds of implementation problems have emerged and how are they being addressed? What’s happening that wasn’t expected?” (p. 117).

### **Research Methods and Data**

The method of inquiry for this project is informed by Patton’s (2008) Utilization-Focused Evaluation. We selected this method to inform the collaborative working relationship developed with our principal coaches. Patton (2008) further argues:

Utilization-focused program evaluation is evaluation done for and with specific intended primary users for specific, intended uses. Utilization-focused evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration for how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use (p. 37).

The emphasis on the utilization of this process throughout the coaching cycle made this a useful design tool to address program refinements based on first-hand encounters and opportunities for problem solving in our coaching community.

Qualitative interviews served as the primary research method. Four principal coaches were selected based on their unique areas of expertise. Our coaches previously served in numerous leadership roles and had extensive experience supporting and mentoring principals in the district. Through the perspectives of these participants we sought to utilize their insights to document a coaching approach based on context specific experiences throughout the coaching process.

Our interview questions also focused on gathering information about what is needed to be an effective urban school principal and which coaching practices truly support principals in their efforts to improve teaching and learning. The qualitative interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide. Patton (2002) states, “The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject” (p. 342). The purpose of the interviews is to get a sense of key stakeholders' recommendations for supporting principals through effective and meaningful coaching.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Interviews were coded for emerging themes. Coding of observational, personal, and theoretical notes was done during the analysis phase. Connecting themes related to my research questions using analytic memos focused data analysis. To help trace emergent themes, a framework adapted from Maxwell (1996) will be constructed to link the concepts to the key questions posed in this study. In order to enhance our understanding of ways to develop/coach an effective urban principal, specifically in a large urban district we also utilize reflexive memos throughout the coaching cycle.

## **Results**

Our results revealed a need for leaders to engage in a process that fostered trust. Coaches worked diligently to implement an approach where principals felt comfortable confiding in them. The principal supervisor also valued confidentiality throughout the

coaching process and allowed coaches to engage with principals in a way that ensured support without the fear of coaches reporting back to district supervisors.

Also vital to the success of this unique coaching context (network-university-school) is the fact that the coaches are viewed as having the contextual knowledge of the processes used in the district. This background knowledge affords the coaches with a high level of credibility with the principals they coach. The principals knew of the success their coaches had as school leaders, which furthered the trust the principals had in the expertise of the coaches.

Data gathering was central to the effectiveness of the process. The coach reviewed each principal's goals prior to their first meeting. A "cycle" of work process was utilized to determine the effectiveness of each focus areas. The focus of the "cycle" of work served to engage principals in opportunities for reflection to brainstorm and strategize goals for the upcoming school year. Coaches assisted principals in the development of their principal development plan (PDP) goals. In addition, they were mindful of the varied experiences, contexts and existing systems of support and principal competencies needed for continuous improvement. The cycle of work process included the following components:

**1) Developing a Coaching Community:** Central to our work is support for a coaching community that allows principal coaches to convene monthly, share resources and problem-solve dilemmas. During the 2016-17 cycle of work, coaches shared feedback that they needed opportunities to discuss and align their individual coaching practices to the particular expectations



and needs of the principals in the same district. In order to provide participants with a platform for this, each month coaches facilitate a discussion on a topic of importance. This activity allowed a coaching community to form that broadens the level of support provided to principals.

**2) Review School Improvement Plan:** The coaching cycle is "grounded" in the goals set forth in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and principal evaluation/or district-wide frameworks. These documents helped to guide what the coach and principal focused on and serve as the foundation for the coaching experience.

**3) Set data-informed goals:** Coaches and the principal then analyzed evidence (data) to determine what the focus areas should be. For example, if our data indicate that 3rd grade reading is an issue, coaches and the principal identified that as a priority focus area. Evidence is gathered for the focus areas and analyzed together.

**4) Developing implementation plans:** Next they narrowed the focus and developed a goal. For example, by the winter Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) assessment, 70% of 3rd grade students will reach their growth targets or by 3/1, there will be a 10% increase in the number of staff who indicate that my communication methods have improved. Coaches and principals set this goal together and it has to be realistic. This is also the stage when they incorporate what research indicates are best practices. For example, we may read about best practices in reading instruction and decide on what steps the principal will take in order to make improvements. We develop an implementation plan.

**5) Developing and Achieving Benchmarks:** The Coach and principal create a plan that includes multiple opportunities to assess whether work toward the goals are meeting benchmarks set. Each goal includes relevant impact measures and key benchmarks for showing improvement co-

developed by the principal and the coach. In addition, coaches progressed monitored the principal's development using specific impact measures aligned to each goal.

### **Significance**

Our exploration of effective coaching is designed to produce transformative principals, empowered to excel in their leadership role. The coaching experiences must be rooted in meaningful interactions, with opportunities for deep reflection and refinement of the strategy and approaches used. Studies have pointed to flaws in the overall school structure, curriculum and instruction that compromise student success and teacher effectiveness (Elmore, 2004; Payne, 2008). This is especially true for urban public schools. Through the perspectives of principal coaches working with educational leadership faculty we are engaging in continuous program improvement that provides current and relevant support and development for principals committed to effectively leading urban public schools.

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