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A Coach's Perspective: Where Policy Truly Meets Practice

Abstract

P-12 Educator's Voice, the first article in a special section, "The (Elusive) Connection between Practice and Policy.

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A Coach's Perspective: Where Policy Truly Meets Practice

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Public education is functioning in a system that is slow to accommodate the change for which initiatives call and instructional coaches can offer a unique perspective into how those policy and practice coexist, or not. Research and recent initiatives indicate newly identified benefits of collaborative planning, assessment, and curriculum design by teachers. Districts, administrators, and even state teaching standards expect teachers to work together. Having been both a participating teacher and a facilitator of training sessions under these initiatives, I have experienced benefits and halted learning under a collaboration initiative. As a teacher, I experienced a variety of collaborative relationships and in my current position as an instructional literacy coach, I facilitate teacher observations, literature review, and reflection. I have discovered how differently collaboration can look from group to group, from meeting to meeting, and from day to day. In my reflection, I speculate whether true collaboration can be mandated in policy. What must be in place for a group of teachers to do more than share ideas and resources, but to take a brave and critical look at their teaching and to interpret evidence of student learning? What is the role of policy? In a position where policy meets practice, I am growing more critical of the nature and impact of collaboration in its most effective form.

In the five years that I taught 7th grade language arts and social studies, I enjoyed a variety of collaborative relationships. The interview team who hired me consisted of a teacher who became my mentor and who answered

my numerous questions as a first year teacher; everything from filing paperwork, to state standards, to the in-building “who’s who”. In the next few years, it became clear which teachers shared similar philosophies and styles of teaching. I found myself with these like-minded teachers in the same summer writing institutes and workshops. My informal collaborative relationships formed in spite of a system that was not structured around intentional collaboration. As like-minded colleagues, our best hope was to look for each other in staff meetings or over email in hopes to get together and continue the work we were passionate about bringing to our classrooms, to our students. There were no common planning times, few teachers with an expert grade level, and no structured content nor grade level teams. In a rare situation where teachers might plan together, unfortunately, lessons or units were likely to be similar only on the surface. They were common in the assessments or reading materials used with little attention to student work or comprehension of the content, goals, or sustainable skill sets. Collaboration relationships were built on trust, safety, and willingness to share, however, they were not a function of a policy in place.

Very recently, our district implemented a literacy collaboration initiative for all content area teachers in middle and high schools. There is ongoing support in the form of action research in practice and one-on-one instructional literacy coaching. In my particular building we have new administrators and a new schedule that provides time for grade level and content meetings.

Teachers have been restructured to teach in an expert area or grade level. In fortunate contrast, my building has restructured core teachers into teams that share students and planning times. Teachers have time in each day when they can meet with their content group or grade level group, whether it be in meetings or informally. We now find ourselves in the fourth year of a collaborative effort to bring better literacy instruction to content classes. Each core teacher has participated in a year of on-site training and classroom-embedded instructional coaching. Teachers observed each other instructing in class and met to discuss the results of implementation. The consistently identified benefit of this model is the time and opportunity to share and experience classrooms and instructional strategies. There is a piece I still see lacking in this model. The relationships in these groups must be tended with intention and reflection. The safety to share does not always come naturally. The courage to risk passionate practice of teachers does not necessarily come in a mandated policy.

A Spectrum of Formalities

Having taught along side the same teachers I now support, I have not only been a participant, but also a facilitator at meetings of all levels of formality. Teachers drop into each other's classes for supplies or questions and may spark questions about practice, materials, or strategies. This is an example of happenstance collaboration. These same teachers may partner up to work on a project or unit under a curriculum budget building goal. Further along the spectrum are mandated meetings where teachers are required to have specific conversations, planning or curriculum design with the support of administration. Under our recent district collaboration initiative, teachers participate in a reflective teaching and learning cycle. An instructional coach and a team of teachers cycle through classroom visitations, planning sessions, literature review, and one-on-one coaching. Our focus is on content literacy and metacognitive awareness of thinking strategies and process. Each teacher experienced an initial training year with an introduction to the coaching cycle

and Reading Apprenticeship from Strategic Literacy Initiative, WestEd. In the collaboration experiences I have had from before, during and currently under this initiative, my strong belief is that the most powerful teacher growth comes from safe and inquisitive collegial relationships, regardless of the level of formality.

In formal department or staff meetings, interactions can be quite different from those in a less formal, impromptu meeting or phone call. I know collaboration that has considerable impact on student learning and is fueled by teacher passion and creativity, has to be flexible in form and function in a visit to a friend's classroom or a socializing event. I have also experience teacher growth in collaborative planning, sharing of student work and instructional strategies that may have only been possible with the accountability usually associated with a higher level of formality, with sign-in sheets and minutes recorded.

When, really, the accountability comes from each other in a collaborative group truly focused on sharpening teacher practice and knowing what learning is taking place in class, there is little need for management outside the group, no matter how formal or informal. This gives me pause again... how much of true collaboration can be held accountable by policy? What elements of human interactions can be mandated by meeting and student work analysis protocols?

Prerequisites for Practice Changing Collaboration

Just as students are challenged to take risks, challenge themselves, and be willing to try again when things do not go as planned, teachers will look critically at their teaching and make powerful changes when they feel that sharing will not jeopardize their reputation in the eyes of their colleagues. With the optimistic view I have always held that teachers are naturally this way, I stand corrected by new learning experiences; the perspective of the teacher sharing is the determinant, not the opinions of the colleagues. There must be a common core belief that trying

something new in the classroom with sound rationale, patience to make adjustments, and persistence is the preferred path to reaching more students or improving the depths of understanding. In a collaborative setting, a teacher sharing classroom experiences must believe there is learning to be gained from sharing what has been successful or troublesome in class, questions, potential misinterpretations of formative assessments, and the misconceptions or gaps in student learning. One crucial prerequisite for a reflective collaborative relationship, as with all learning, is a safe risk taking environment.

When an instructional coach is involved, the dynamics of that collaborative community can be greatly influential. It is imperative that a teacher-coach relationship be grounded in the understanding that all information shared be focused on learning and growth, free of evaluation or performance review. Dedicated teachers do incredible work to move their students forward and any passionate practitioner has the right to be protective of their work. However, teachers who are aware of what is working, not working in their instruction, and why, are aware of what ought to change and what ought to remain when looking to adjust instruction, materials, or expectations for their students. Participating in an inquiry process of evaluating our own practice improves student learning. For teachers to feel safe and value the process of questioning the effectiveness of an instructional practice depends on understanding that the coach does not share information with administration, that the notes are intended for the teacher only, and that the coach is an advocate for teacher and student needs when working with administration. How teachers view my influence and perceived motives does affect the impact I can have with teachers and in other building committees. The process of hiring a coach for a building should be based on a distinct delineation between a collegial coaching relationship and an evaluative process.

The Role of Policy in Practice

A well intentioned policy is ineffective

when the accountability measure is dependent solely on compliance. How effective a policy can be in improving teacher collaboration depends the degree to which the focus includes identifying and honoring the teachers' learning processes. If a collaborative policy is based on the requirements of reflective logs, new certificate levels, or meeting minutes reported will only be successful where teachers are already practicing with effective collaboration, when the interactions are trusting, non-evaluative, and focused on student growth. When teachers, principals, or central office assigned educators are working under a collaborative policy that have product based requirements, the work is easily done as an afterthought, haphazard, and just under the deadline so that we can get back to our "real" work. These are policies under which true collaboration occurs in spite of, not as a function of, the policy in place because dedicated teachers make it so.

Policy can potentially be credited with the success of positively impacting student learning or providing strong professional development that might have occurred regardless. It is important for an initiative to have the focus on providing necessary structures for learning, or supporting professionally driven teachers to provide quality instruction and curriculum. Reconfiguring schedules, teaching teams, or scheduling learning support for students are examples of structural policy. In addition, goal setting practices, literature reviews, learning and sharing instructional or assessment strategies under a policy should occur in way that reflects the collaboration between teachers with various degrees of expertise and readiness, but all moving forward. Accountability measures should be based on demonstration of learning and moving forward.

Reshaping Policy to Support Practice

If the expectation is that teachers will work collaboratively to examine student work, instruction, and materials, that taking risks and questioning effectiveness is embraced and supported, that time would be provided for admin-

istrative support in areas of greatest need, then collaborative work could truly change practice. However, the very dynamic nature of teaching and learning is based on an element of human nature. Learners are social, motivated, and engaged when they are successful and comfortable negotiating steps to take toward the next challenge. Teachers, as learners, flourish when they are aware of and embrace the journey; the process. Relationships with teachers continues to be a leading determinant in the academic success of students for the same reason that true teacher collaboration often happens between like-minded teachers in an informal setting. Collaborative work that causes teachers to change their practice to meet the needs of their students occurs in safe and encouraging settings.

When a collaborative policy is focused on the inquiry process and learning for educators, the “real” work is the focus. The questions that arise, the proverbial “ah-ha” moments, the conversations, the sharing and visiting that occurs in an informal setting are identified as the meaningful means, ends, and catalysts, initiatives, and are more formal collaborative settings. Professional collaboration mandates that will improve student learning must be rigorous and research grounded, responsive to teachers as learners, and allow for teachers to be at different places in readiness and implementation. In my experience, it is more the nature of professional respect and social interactions that contribute to the impact of collaborative work, than the mandate. Teachers who trust that I will not share information with other teachers or administration

feel comfortable taking risks and looking closely at their teaching. Therefore, our mandated meetings are only powerful if I take into consideration where teachers are in their growth.

A Coach’s Perspective

What is the role of policy in practice? When it comes to collaboration, initiatives ought to provide the structure for the collaboration in allotted time (both to implement and to reflect for future application), funding, and sustainability. Policy ought to provide the framework, but the supervisors and educational leaders at the national, state, district and building levels are responsible for harnessing and perpetuating the climate for effective collaboration. As a coach, I engage in reflections and analysis of how teachers are growing in their practice. In addition, my learning parallels the learning in groups of teachers reflecting on and evaluating student progress. My challenge is to take the resources provided by policy, and tailor them to the complexities of teacher needs and interactions. Fortunately, the expertise and dedication of teachers is my gold mine resource and bringing teachers together is a catalyst for learning on its own. Practitioners, the people, who work together to face students in desks each day are called on to look critically at their practice, their craft; to appeal to the human dynamics of teaching and learning. Collaborative groups will function informally or formally, but policy aimed at the process of improving practice for all teachers at their entry points will have far-reaching results.