

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## INSTRUCTIONAL DIALOGUE

# Literacy coaches use this method one-on-one

By Marilyn Duncan

**I**nstructional dialogue is a process that helps teachers increase their knowledge and commit to a change in classroom practice. Their commitment to change instruction occurs when they see themselves putting into practice what they have learned and the results are evidenced in increased student achievement.

Rita Bean (2004) describes a continuum of coaching through three levels of intensity.

- At Level One, coaches develop relationships with the colleagues they support.
- Level Two is more formal. Activities at Level Two may be in small group



or with the whole staff and are designed based upon the needs at the school, grade, or classroom level.

- Finally, there is Level Three, a more intense form of coaching where the coach is working directly with a teacher.

While I operate at all levels of coaching with the people I support, the coaching that consistently has the biggest impact on student learning is at Bean's Level Three and involves what is called instructional dialogue.

Instructional dialogue is a structured

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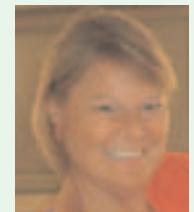
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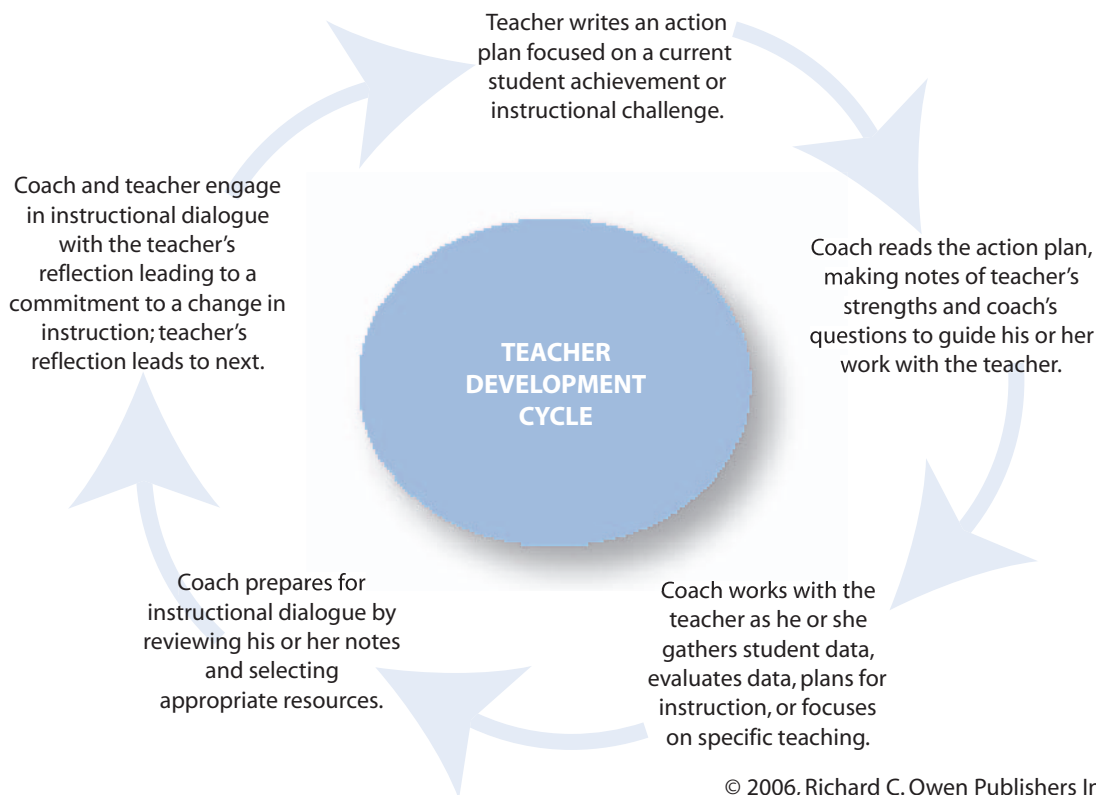
Vanderheyden  
has been known  
to come to the  
rescue as a coach  
for math  
teachers.

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**Listening allows the coach to identify an entry point to the teacher's learning.**

conversation about teaching and learning that provides feedback to the teacher. The measure of improvement is always student learning. Instructional dialogue is neither an interrogation nor a therapy session. It's a discussion between colleagues learning from each other to do their jobs better. Instructional dialogue is an opportunity for teachers through the mentorship and facilitation of a coach to think about their classroom practice and ways to improve it. The figure above provides an overview of this cycle.

The process begins when the teacher, with the support of the coach, identifies a challenge to instruction through an action plan. Together, the teacher and coach determine what their job-embedded work will look and sound like. The coach might demonstrate an assessment tool or instructional approach for the teacher. The coach might work alongside the teacher to evaluate student work or conduct small group instruction. The coach might observe the teacher during classroom instruction. Regular time is always established for instructional dialogue. This means the teacher and the coach have a scheduled an uninterrupted opportunity for discussion and feedback.

The job of the coach during instructional dialogue is to:

- Lead the structured conversation;
- Listen carefully for what the teacher already knows and what the teacher can learn next;
- Know when to ask questions and when to provide answers and strategies for implementation; and
- Support the teacher in making a direct link between his or her learning and student learning.

Instructional dialogue is systematic and focused. The focus comes from the current challenge the teacher is experiencing and has identified in the action plan. Data collected by the coach (such as observational notes, conversations with students, student work samples) will support the dialogue. Analyzing this kind of data with the coach helps the teacher make a commitment to a change in instruction. That change is expected to increase student achievement.

**Listening and questioning effectively**

One of the most important skills a coach can develop is learning how to listen. Listening

Portions of this article are adapted from Chapter 5 of *Literacy Coaching: Developing Effective Teachers through Instructional Dialogue*, by Marilyn Duncan. Copyright, 2006. Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

allows the coach to identify an entry point to the teacher's learning. When given time to talk about their teaching, teachers usually share a specific challenge in the first few minutes of the conversation. A skilled listener can quickly confirm strengths and uncover these challenges if a teacher is unable to do so.

The coach can start the conversation in a number of ways. For example, a teacher who is gathering formative assessment data might be invited to talk about "how it went" or "what you learned about your students." A teacher who is exploring effective questioning in small group instruction might be asked, "What were some of the things you heard your kids say today?" The teacher selecting resources for his instruction might be asked to share what he's thinking about after he and the coach worked together to select literacy resources.

These initial questions are designed to be open-ended enough to encourage conversation and making the beginning of the dialogue risk free; an opportunity for a teacher to reflect on the challenge being experienced and what is needed to overcome it.

Once the teacher begins to talk, the coach listens carefully. For many coaches, this is challenging. Some coaches might feel that just listening means that they are not doing their jobs. On the contrary, appropriate meaningful feedback means coaches have to listen to determine what feedback is needed and to determine the right time to provide feedback.

Questions are an integral part of instructional dialogue. It's the coach's ability to listen that leads to appropriate questioning. The coach's questions during instructional dialogue come from what the teacher says. The questions aren't scripted; they are based upon data the coach has collected during her work with the teacher and the responses of the teacher. They are not the "guess what's in my head" kind of questions. Instead, these questions uncover the teacher's beliefs and challenge them in a way that extends the teacher's thinking.

See a transcribed exchange on p. 4 between Alex, a teacher seeking feedback about her students' engagement in independent work, and myself.

### **When to listen; when to ask; when to tell**

Learning occurs in different ways for different individuals. The dialogue example on pp. 4-6 demonstrates the importance of the coach's skill in knowing how to listen. It has also emphasized the need for the coach to know when to ask questions appropriate to the level of the teacher's current knowledge. It is just as important for the coach to know when the teacher can work through an issue herself or simply to tell. The effective coach knows when to listen, when to ask, and when to tell. Feedback through instructional dialogue is the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own practices with support from a colleague. Teachers are given the appropriate amount of support they need for learning.

Listening, asking, telling — each is part of the collegial relationship that develops between the coach and teacher. It's not only the teacher who has learned and committed to trying something with her students. The coach learns as well. Coaches learn by working with their colleagues. They learn about collecting, analyzing, and using student data. They learn more about supporting adult learners. They also learn that coaching is a partnership to which both teacher and coach contribute. The partnership is about bringing out the best in both; becoming a more effective teacher and becoming a more effective coach. And both contribute to improving the achievement of every student.

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### **About the author**

**Marilyn Duncan** has been a teacher for over 30 years. Her work has been in the classroom with children and as a teacher developer. She trained literacy coaches in schools across the United States. She was the Trainer of Coordinators for The Learning Network, where she developed the trainers of coaches. She has recently been involved in a large-scale district initiative in Colorado. Duncan is the author of two professional books, *Literacy Coaching: Developing Effective Teachers Through Instructional Dialogue* (2006) and *The Kindergarten Book: A Guide to Literacy Instruction* (2005). She lives with her husband, Peter, in Wanaka, New Zealand.



**Stopping the conversation and asking the teacher to analyze what is working in her classroom helps her focus on her learners' strengths. It also leads to the establishment of expectations for all students based upon the behaviors of some students.**

## LISTENING AND QUESTIONING IN ACTION

### An example of instructional dialogue

**A**lex is a teacher seeking feedback about her students' engagement in independent work. Marilyn is the author in her role as an instructional coach. The text in green reflects Marilyn's observations and thinking while coaching.

**Marilyn:** How did you feel about your students' engagement during independent work time today?

*This question confirms the teacher's action plan and provides time for the teacher to talk.*

**Alex:** Not much differently than I feel any day. I can tell you right now the names of the students who are working hard and seem involved in their work. And I can tell you the names of the students who look like they are wasting their time and mine too.

*What the teacher says about knowing who was engaged and who was not engaged leads to my next question.*

**Marilyn:** Let's talk about some of those kids who are engaged and some you feel aren't engaged. If we compare our observations, maybe we can come to some conclusions.

**Alex:** That's easy. (She begins by talking about the students who are not engaged.)

*I suggest a shift in focus in the conversation.*

**Marilyn:** Let's start by talking about the students who are engaged first.

*She needs to see that she has contributed to what her students are doing well.*

**Alex:** That's easy, too. (Alex talks about the students who are consistently engaged in their independent work. She names some of the same students that I have interviewed).

*Stopping the conversation and asking the teacher to analyze what is working in her classroom helps her focus on her learners' strengths. It also leads to the establishment of expectations for all students*

*based upon the behaviors of some students.*

**Marilyn:** I came to the same conclusion about some of those same students. Let me share with you what I asked them and what they said. That might help us come up with some behaviors we want all of your students to have. I asked the students three questions: "What are you doing?", "Why are you doing it?" and "What do you expect to accomplish today?"

Let's start with Tanisha. She was reading independently when I interviewed her. I asked her what she was doing and she said, "Reading *Because of Winn Dixie*" (DeCamillo, 2000). I asked her why she was reading this book. She replied, "I like books about girls my age and dogs. My teacher told us about this book. In fact, she read some of it aloud to us and I thought I'd like it. I just started it but already I like it. I was right."

I asked her one more question: "What do you expect to accomplish today in reading?" She answered, "I want to read until I find out if the girl's dad lets her keep Winn Dixie. Did you know this dog was named for a grocery store?" She laughed.

*I share a few more examples of students engaged in reading. The students make similar comments.*

**Marilyn:** What are you thinking now?

**Alex:** Can I clone those kids? That's just how I would like all my students to talk about their independent reading.

**Marilyn:** I couldn't agree with you more. Let's figure out what they were doing. What were some of the commonalities? For instance, what expectations had they set for themselves about their reading?

**Alex:** Well, they all knew that they had to find a book that was interesting to them.

**Marilyn:** So that's one thing we have to determine. Are the disengaged kids interested in their independent reading books?

**Alex:** Not only interested, but are they able to read them and make meaning?

**Marilyn:** Why don't you take a minute and write down what you're thinking.

**AN EXAMPLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DIALOGUE**

*I remind Alex to take a few notes so that she has something to refer back to after our dialogue is finished. I also use her notes as an assessment sample — an opportunity to confirm that she understands what I think she understands.*

*(Alex takes a few notes. She writes, “Students must be interested in their books and be able to make meaning from them.”)*

**Marilyn:** What else were those students doing? Remember when I asked Tanisha what she expected to accomplish today? She said, “I want to read until I find out if the girl’s dad lets her keep Winn Dixie.”

**Alex:** She was setting a goal. So what I want my students to think about is what they want to accomplish as readers. Not how many pages they’ll read per day, which is what I’m having them do now. That takes very little thinking. Tanisha was thinking about what she wanted to find out as she was making her way through the beginning of *Because of Winn Dixie*.

**Marilyn:** This is what I hear you saying, by listening to what those kids said, you have come up with three expectations for all of your students: books that interest them; books they can read with understanding; and being able to determine what they want to accomplish as a reader to set a goal for their independent reading time. Am I right?

**Alex:** Yes, but I think I’ve told them that a bunch of times.

*This is an indication to me that Alex isn’t sure what to do next even if she has a clear idea of what she wants students to do. She has already exhausted all of her ideas. I think she knows more than she thinks she knows, so my task is to provide more support. I do that by making the next question more specific.*

**Marilyn:** So let’s look at the difference between telling students what to do and setting expectations for how they will do it. What might that look and sound like?

**Alex:** I guess my role is determining if the book they are reading is engaging and if they can read it

with meaning.

**Marilyn:** Would you expect that to always be your role?

**Alex:** Well, it’s probably always going to be my role to make sure it’s happening, but I would sure like it if they knew how to do those things themselves.

**Marilyn:** I agree. I guess that’s why we call it independent reading, because ultimately we want them doing this independently.

**Alex:** So maybe that’s what I work on this week. I could be determining who is reading a book that interests them and that they can read with meaning.

**Marilyn:** How will you do that?

*I am aware of the importance of Alex having a strategy for immediately putting into practice what we are talking about. The remainder of the dialogue is spent moving from talk to action by planning how Alex will use her time to implement this new strategy.*

**Alex:** I guess I’ll start with the students I know aren’t in a book that’s working and I’ll try to figure out why. I can listen to them read a little bit and talk to them about why I pick certain books.

**Marilyn:** Let’s think about your time. What will you need to do with individuals and what might you be doing with small groups or the whole group?

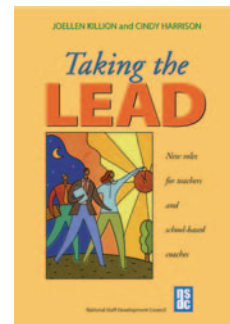
*I want Alex to see that she can use her time effectively by meeting with small groups and the whole group to reach her outcomes.*

**Alex:** I’ll need to meet individually with students who don’t have a book that’s working, but I bet I could talk with some in small groups. I could also talk with the whole group about why I choose books to read and how I know if they are working for me.

**Marilyn:** Who else could share some experiences in book selection?

*I’m reminding Alex that she knows another way to save instructional time. She often has students provide demonstrations.*

**Alex:** Oh, my kids who are engaged. I could ask them the same questions you asked them, but do it in front of the whole group.



**New book from NSDC for coaches**

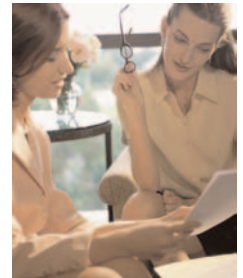
**Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches**

*By Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison*

This guide to school-based coaching is written by two educators who have developed coaching models and worked closely with dozens of coaches. They explore the complex, multifaceted roles played by teacher leaders and school-based coaches, as well as examining district and school expectations, hiring practices, and deployment of these educators.

A companion CD-ROM includes dozens of tools that teacher leaders and school-based coaches can use in their work. One of those tools is a new set of Innovation Configurations for school-based coaches. NSDC, 2006. Item B352. Price: \$36, members; \$45, nonmembers

**I want Alex to see that she can use her time effectively by meeting with small groups and the whole group to reach her outcomes.**



**AN EXAMPLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DIALOGUE**

**Marilyn:** And don't forget why Tanisha decided to read *Winn Dixie*.

**Alex:** Yes! She wanted to read it after she heard me reading a portion to the class. I could do that with a lot of high-interest books.

**Marilyn:** It sounds like you have some great ideas. Let's look at how we could plan for them over the next week – what you'll do with the whole group and with individuals.

*We spend the next 10 minutes planning for the week and setting out the support she might need. I bring the dialogue to closure by summarizing what has been learned, why it has been learned, and the commitment to change in practice. My goal is that Alex will implement this new learning.*

**Marilyn:** So let's think about the steps we went through today and why. First, we talked about what your students are doing who are really engaged. What did that enable us to do?

**Alex:** We could figure out what we wanted all students to do.

**Marilyn:** Yes, we basically set expectations for independent reading. What else did we do?

**Alex:** We determined how to communicate those expectations to the students and planned for it.

**Marilyn:** Let's jot down those two steps. They seem pretty simple, and I bet we could apply them to other areas of your room once we work through independent reading.

Alex and I monitored the result of this dialogue. She spent the next two weeks setting expectations and providing demonstrations for the whole group. At the same time, she was collecting data about readers who were not engaged in independent reading. Eventually, all but three of her students were able to remain engaged while reading independently. Alex monitored those three students and provided additional support to increase their level of engagement.

An extra benefit of her work was the increasing fluency in her students. Because they were reading more often and for longer periods of time, they were able to read more fluently which also improved their comprehension.

**Teachers Teaching Teachers**

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# Coaches help teachers collaborate

**W**hen coaches work with teachers, they do more than support improving teaching and learning. They also model and teach skills for collaboration. Teaching is often described as a lonely job, one teachers do in isolation within their classrooms with their students. Increasingly, teachers are finding it not only necessary but also rewarding to engage intellectually with their fellow teachers.

In one of the significant studies of school improvement, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) reported that when teachers collaborate, improvement happens. Curriculum becomes more consistent, instruction is refined and more rigorous, collective responsibility increases; teachers' social-emotional support increases; student learning increases; and experimentation and risk taking expand.

Many teachers, however, are skeptical about collaboration. They believe collaboration takes time away from more important work. They are uncomfortable with differing opinions or conflict. They view time in collaboration as extra time beyond their already busy workday. As more schools move to using communities of practice, vertical and horizontal teaming, whole-faculty study groups, and other forms of teacher collaboration as designs for professional development and school improvement, teachers need multiple opportunities to learn about and work in successful teams. Shirley Hord (2003), leading researcher on professional learning communities, identified both staff and student benefits in schools where teachers work together when compared to more traditional school structures. Staff morale increases while staff absenteeism decreases; better solutions to complex problems emerge; teacher isolation decreases; and increased confidence in all members of the school community

increases. Students experience decreased dropout rates, increased academic success, lower absenteeism, and smaller achievement gaps.

Successful teams are more powerful, and even smarter, than any one individual. Yet successful teams require constant support and guidance. Teams are more than a collection of individuals; they are individuals who are committed



## COLLABORATION

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

to a common purpose and who know that wisdom is generated when they pool their individual perspectives and knowledge into the whole. Teams result from establishing basic structures that are put into place as teams are forming to ensure success. Teams grow in their ability to take on complex, sensitive issues, such as members' core beliefs about important topics.

Coaches have important responsibilities in guiding teams. These responsibilities include modeling and teaching both fundamental skills of collaboration as well as facilitating teams as they work together. Fundamental skills for team collaboration include norms, decision making, communication skills, and conflict resolution.

Setting agreements about how team mem-

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bers will work together as a team is one way coaches can support teams. Sometimes called norms, for normative behavior, team members identify how they want to behave when they are in the team. Teams frequently develop norms about purpose, responsibilities, and roles of team members, their communication processes, and logistics. The list of agreements at right offers an example of each type of agreement.

Coaches can assist teams or team facilitators develop norms, monitor them on a periodic basis, handle breaches in the norms, and revise norms as necessary. One of the most challenging aspects of developing agreements is not creating them, but monitoring them and handling in a fair and open way the occasional times when some members of the team do not keep some of the agreements.

Decision making is another team responsibility. Most teams make many types of decisions. Reaching agreement on their norms is just one example of decision making. There are various ways teams can make decisions. Coaches can help teams explore various decision-making methodologies, such as simple majority, majority-majority, or consensus and the potential advantages and disadvantages of each. When teams take time upfront to talk about how they will make decisions, when the time comes to make significant decisions and even those that may be heated, how the decision is made will be clear to all members and will not complicate the decision-making process.

Competence in communication skills is essential for team members. Some communication skills that help teams be more successful include being clear about one's intentions, stating a point of view, listening fully, asking skillful questions, making observations, and speaking the truth. Most adults can benefit from both reminders about and sometimes training in some of these communication skills. *Leading for Results* by NSDC Executive Director Dennis Sparks (2007) is an excellent resource for reviewing important relationship and communication skills. "High-quality relationships," says Sparks, "built upon clarity, directness, and integrity compel change and produce results" (p. 52).

Resolving conflict is another area in which coaches can support teams. For many teams who are still in their early stage of development, the fear of conflict prevents members from being open and honest. As a result, the team's overall effectiveness is compromised and members begin to pull away. When team members — particularly those who facilitate teams — have basic skills to resolve conflict and the deep understanding that conflict can be productive rather than destructive, they will help team members use constructive strategies to resolve conflict.

Coaches can help teams learn the fundamental skills that will help them be successful and develop that expertise sufficiently so that teams develop independent competence with the skills of collaboration. Team members can review the effectiveness and efficiency of their collaboration and continue to refine those skills as they grow as team members.

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### Agreements of the team

#### Purpose

- We agree to be goal-driven.
- We agree to keep the best interests of students in the forefront of every conversation.

#### Responsibilities

- We will come to the meeting prepared and have the materials we need to complete the planned agenda.
- We will have a facilitator, timekeeper, recorder, and summarizer for each meeting and we will rotate roles.

#### Decision making

- We agree to make decisions by majority-majority (80% of team members must agree to support the decision.)
- We agree to hear all viewpoints in a fair and equitable way.

#### Logistics

- We will meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays during common planning.
- Our meeting will begin five minutes after the beginning of our planning time and conclude five minutes before start of class to allow all members to take care of personal and student needs.



# Classroom has poignant pull

**M**y professional life has been a whirlwind over the past few years. I've had great successes, seeing my work published and joining in educational conversations at the highest level. I've sat on Governor's councils, worked for state and regional teaching partnerships and led staff development in countless forums on countless topics. To earn the confidence and admiration of decision makers has been a storybook ending to a professional dream.

But I'm exhausted.

Days run long for me — rarely less than 14 hours — yet I never seem to shorten my list of things to do. Juggling memberships on meaningful committees with writing for journals and planning for presentations leaves little time for family and friends — especially when you're teaching a full load and have 12 sets of papers to grade! Sometimes, I'm left to wonder if I wouldn't be better off taking a full time position in a leadership role.

Those positions come at me from all directions sometimes. Having built a strong network of professional connections, rarely a week goes by where I don't receive a call from someone checking to see if I'm interested in doing something new. "Look me up," they'll say, "as soon as you're ready for a change. We've got the perfect position for you."

And lots of times, they're right. I've been tempted by opportunities to lead school reform or work in educational policy. My personal passions run deep, ranging from the creative use of

instructional technology to meeting the challenges of staffing our highest-need schools. I've learned lessons that I know I could share with others, making an impact on education far beyond the four walls of my classroom.

But I'm torn because I believe that part of my credibility with practitioners and policy makers comes from my work inside those four walls. In every setting, I speak with the first-hand

knowledge gained from daily interactions with children. I am constantly carving new ground as an educator — which is convincing regardless of my audience — and I worry that my "expertise" would decrease with each year away from the classroom.

Besides, teaching is more than what I do — it's who I am. I'm surrounded by the smiles of students who are simply jazzed to learn from me. The best moments are those when I know that we've connected. Heads nod and hands rise as new discoveries

are made. Mental synergy makes our room come alive and the bell is often met with groans.

The groans hurt, however, each time that I announce that I'm going to be out — yet again — to go to what my students have come to call, "another stupid teacher meeting." Their heartfelt desire to spend the day with me is genuine and real, leaving me to fear the day when they don't groan because I've become irrelevant to them.

I guess I wonder if it's possible to remain a classroom teacher and lead at the same time. At what point do my efforts to elevate teaching prevent me from being a teacher? ♦



Conflict between teaching and leading?



Bill Ferriter is a 6th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.

**Join the conversation with Bill by visiting [www.nsd.org/blog/](http://www.nsd.org/blog/) and offering your opinion. Bill posts his provocative ideas frequently — be sure to return often.**

## Why a strategy may fit here but not there

**R**esults of an experimental study reported in the *Journal of Educational Research* show that an evidence-based intervention that improved reading achievement at Title I schools in one state was not as effective in another state. The researchers' analysis of the findings underscores the importance of matching improvement strategies to school contexts.

What strategy did the researchers study? Helen S. Apthorp and colleagues studied a year-long supplemental vocabulary program that included 20 minutes of daily read-alouds and related oral-language activities. Fifteen 3rd-grade teachers in seven Title I schools across two sites were randomly assigned to use either the intervention or their usual instruction.

### What were the characteristics of the two study sites?

Site A included four schools in an Alabama district that employs a standards-based approach to reading and language arts and participates in statewide professional development emphasizing the five components of reading instruction. In each school, more than 92% of the students were black, none were identified as Limited English Proficient, and at least 90% were eligible for subsidized meals.

Site B included three schools in two neighboring districts in New York. These schools employ a balanced literacy approach that emphasizes embedded skill instruction. In each school, at least 74% of the students were white, 5% or fewer were identified as Limited English Proficient, and 24% to 35% were eligible for subsidized meals.

Researchers surveyed teachers, collected teacher activity logs, and conducted classroom observations. Reading achievement tests, along with pre-tests and post-tests in oral and sight vocabulary, were given. At the outset, the New York students were performing at or above grade

level, while the Alabama students were performing predominantly below grade level. In both sites, all teachers using the intervention met at least two of three criteria for implementation fidelity (the degree to which the intervention was delivered as intended).

### How did the results differ at each site?

At the end of the year, the Alabama students who received the intervention performed significantly higher in vocabulary and reading achievement than students in the same site who did not receive the intervention. In the New York site, however, no positive effects were observed.

### How did researchers explain the differing results?

The researchers say it's likely that the students in the New York site already knew the vocabulary words targeted by the intervention. Also, the stand-alone program may have conflicted with the site's balanced literacy approach.

### What contextual factors seem to matter most?

A study of reading achievement in Vermont elementary schools found no relationship between two factors — socioeconomic status and the nature of literacy instruction — and literacy achievement test scores. Most important were the quality of implementation and the fit of an instructional program to the context of the school. The Vermont study identified four contextual factors of schools that met or exceeded state reading standards: program stability, shared vision, knowledgeable K-4 teachers, and multiple opportunities for students to read and discuss books.

### What's the message for coaches?

Coaches may need to guide school staff in selecting improvement strategies that “fit” school context. Such care can improve the likelihood that the selected strategy will positively affect student achievement. ♦

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### EDVANTIA™

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# Coach to the rescue

By Tracy Crow

**T**hree years ago, Eileen Vanderheyden got a frantic call from her assistant principal. A teacher new to her school needed help adjusting to this new environment. Would

Vanderheyden step in? When she walked into the teacher's classroom, Vanderheyden could see that the teacher had a great math lesson but was overwhelmed by classroom management. On the spot, she was a coach.

Vanderheyden is a math teacher at Bloomfield Tech, a vocational school in Bloomfield, N.J., which serves about 500 students in grades 9-12. Bloomfield Tech didn't have a coaching program when Vanderheyden got tapped to coach. A mentoring program at the school provided support only for new teachers with no experience entering the school through an alternate route. More and more teachers are entering the profession via alternate routes, with older adults changing professions to become teachers and bypassing traditional preparatory experiences. School administrators learned that these teachers need support beyond that provided by mentoring and so a coaching model was adopted.

## Becoming a supportive environment

Instructional coaches at Bloomfield Tech work one-on-one with teachers throughout the school year while maintaining a full teaching schedule. This year, the coaching program pairs six coaches with teachers. Vanderheyden says the school has typically paired teachers with coaches

who teach the same subjects, but not always (this year, an English teacher is working with a science teacher). Vanderheyden has always worked with other math teachers, drawing upon her 20-plus years of teaching experience.

How does a full-time high school math teacher find time to coach another full-time high school math teacher? Vanderheyden and her colleague meet whenever they can — before school, during their shared break period, after school — to talk about lessons and instructional practices. They visit one another's classrooms to observe lessons and then they talk about what happened later. The phone in Vanderheyden's classroom could ring anytime, even when she's in the middle of her own tough lesson.

Recently, she received such a call. The less experienced teacher called to say that her classroom was out of control and she didn't know how to get the lesson back on track. By the time, Vanderheyden could break away from her room, she found that the other classroom was quiet and the students were all working on their mathematics, she said. The teacher couldn't explain how it had all come together. "You got them engaged in the lesson; that's what happened," Vanderheyden told her.

Sometimes, it's a matter of confidence, Vanderheyden has noticed. Alternatively certified teachers don't have even the set of experiences that a 23-year-old education graduate would have because they haven't done student teaching



Eileen Vanderheyden

where they've been able to stand in front of students and teach lessons. The teacher also may not realize that there are always going to be tough days. One day, Vanderheyden invited her teacher in to observe a lesson and, to the amazement of the younger teacher, the students were just awful. "It was one of those days where everything was off," she said. Vanderheyden told her young colleague, "This is what happens when you're teaching. There are good days and bad days, and generally you have more good than bad."

Vanderheyden appreciates that her young colleague is open to conversation about what works in the classroom. That attitude isn't a given at the high school level, where teachers typically plan lessons on their own and keep their doors closed. Vanderheyden knows that such an attitude has to become a relic. New or inexperienced teachers aren't the only ones who need support. "We need to coach each other. Math teachers need to coach math teachers," said Vanderheyden, who envisions a time when any teacher, regardless of experience, can raise a question about how to best approach a particular concept in the classroom.

But Bloomfield Tech isn't quite there yet. "We're getting there," Vanderheyden said. "There's more trust now at math department meetings." A teacher can say "I did a really good lesson today" and people see it differently than they would have in the past. Teachers no longer perceive that as someone showing off or saying they're better than other teachers. Now, it's regarded as a generous sharing of good ideas.

The school administrators have learned to trust the work of coaches because they see results. Initially, Vanderheyden said some administrators seemed to expect her to talk about a teacher's mistakes. As a coach, she knew her job was to advocate for the teacher's development, not tattle about what they were doing wrong.

### **Becoming a coach**

How did Vanderheyden prepare herself to become an effective coach? In addition to her varied teaching experiences, she was a member of NSDC's Coaches Academy, a year-long intense learning experience funded through a grant from Wachovia. About 45 teachers from

### **EILEEN VANDERHEYDEN**

**Position:** High school math teacher and instructional coach

**School:** Bloomfield Tech High School

**School district:** Essex County Vocational Technical Schools

**Professional history:** Math teacher since 1964; math chairperson four years; professional development committee member; NSDC's Coaches Academy; instructional coach, three years.

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in mathematics, College of Saint Elizabeth; master's degree in mathematics education, New Jersey City University.

Alabama, Texas, and New Jersey were members of the learning cohort.

Vanderheyden remembers feeling absolutely clueless. "I was the only one in the group who didn't already have coaching responsibilities or experiences," she said. A key change for her was becoming an active listener. She realized that she often listened to the beginning of someone's story and then jumped in with her own experience.

How Vanderheyden teaches has also changed. She knows that engaging students requires more than "teaching by telling." But sometimes she would find herself teaching in the mode of expert at the front of the room, particularly in advanced math classes. Now, she never lets herself do that. As a classroom observer, "I can see when kids aren't learning; I know when I'm not learning," Vanderheyden said. Now in calculus class, "I'll sit there and wait ... and sometimes it's a long time, but eventually, they'll work out the answers for themselves."

Students "getting it" is what makes the work so worthwhile for Vanderheyden. "When those kids look at you and you realize that they've just learned something they never knew before — there's nothing else like that," she said. That's why she values being a coach. "I love teaching," Vanderheyden said. "With coaching, I am able to help somebody else love teaching. I can help them to realize that teaching is not just a job, this really is a vocation." ♦

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— Eileen Vanderheyden