WHEN TEACHERS LISTEN, STUDENTS LEARN

COACHING HELPS TEACHERS INCORPORATE STUDENT VOICE IN THE CLASSROOM

BY LIESEL CARLSON

The midwinter snow fell outside the classroom window as teacher Nicole Minor set up an iPod Touch, pressed record, and focused her 1st-hour Algebra 2 class on the learning target written on the board.

"Please take a moment to read the learning target for today," she told the class. "Think to yourself, how can you write this in your own words so it makes sense to you? Now turn and talk with your neighbor."

After students discussed their thinking with a peer and wrote down their learning targets, Minor chose a few students to share with the whole group and then continued with the lesson.

After 30 minutes, Minor stopped the iPod recording and uploaded it to a secure online platform. A few minutes later, across town, I received a notification that Minor's video had been submitted. As Minor's coach, I was excited to see her latest lesson video, which marked the beginning of a new coaching and learning cycle.

Over the following week, I reviewed the video, selected three one-minute clips, and wrote reflective prompts. The prompts highlighted Minor's effective interactions with students based on the goals of the previous cycle, which were to communicate clear learning targets and increase peer dialogue.

After Minor viewed, reflected, and responded to the prompts, we met for a 30-minute conference. Minor reflected and planned how to replicate effective practices, and together we co-planned the next lesson. Over the school year, we engaged in 10 cycles like this one, each based on a new video.

At the end of the school year, Minor and I sat together reflecting on our yearlong collaboration, which was part of our district's participation

DOMAINS OF THE CLASS (CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT SCORING SYSTEM)		
Emotional support	**Organizational support**	**Instructional support**
How the teacher promotes positive relationships, helps students find enjoyment in learning, feels comfortable in the classroom, and experiences appropriate choice and independence.	The teacher behaviors that establish an effective structure for learning through the organization and management of students' behavior, time, and attention in the classroom.	The ways in which teachers implement lessons and activities to engage students in learning and promote cognitive development.

in a project on My Teaching Partner-Secondary, a research-based coaching approach to improve teacher-student interactions in middle and high school.

Minor shared what she had learned from the project and how she had seamlessly incorporated new practices into her daily instruction at Eastern High School in Lansing, Michigan. I listened intently, and, toward the end of the conversation, I asked, "What if you hadn't participated in the coaching program this year?"

Minor said, "I would have missed out on what the kids had to say." We paused, letting that reflection sink in. Minor realized that she had started listening to students in a different way over the course of the year. As she paid more attention to her interactions with students, she prioritized student voice more, and student engagement increased.

Minor had tapped into one of the core tenets of My Teaching Partner-Secondary. Listening to students and encouraging their agency is a major focus of the model. When teachers listen intentionally to students, they become attuned to what students think, feel, and experience. They value each student's ways of knowing. This, in turn, can create relevant, equitable learning opportunities for students.

HOW THE COACHING PROGRAM WORKS

My work with Minor and three other teachers took place through the Lansing School District's participation in a multiyear project to implement and study the effects of the My Teaching Partner-Secondary 1:1 Video Coaching model.

The model is a collaborative, individualized coaching program that

focuses on effective teacher-student interactions that contribute to students' social and academic gains. Based on research and shown to be effective in two randomized control studies (Allen et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2011), My Teaching Partner-Secondary uses a standardized process that is strengths-based, interactions-focused, collaborative, and rooted in a teacher's actual practice. The coaching model is content-adaptable and can be applied to any subject area.

The primary goal for participating teachers is to improve their teaching through becoming a better observer of their own practice, specifically understanding and describing interactions, intentionally planning greater learning opportunities for students, and improving curriculum implementation (Pianta et. al, 2010).

This coaching model uses the research-validated Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a framework and tool for understanding classroom interactions (Pianta et al., 2012) that focuses on emotional, organizational, and instructional interactions that support, motivate, and engage students. (See table above left.)

Rigorous studies have demonstrated that teachers' ratings on the CLASS measure are predictive of student engagement and achievement (Allen et al., 2013). CLASS is an essential part of the My Teaching Partner-Secondary 1:1 Video Coaching model and is used as a common lens and language for planning, understanding,

and discussing social and academic classroom interactions.

With My Teaching Partner-Secondary, coaching occurs in a cyclical, five-step process:

1. The teacher records a video during a lesson of his or her choosing and submits it to the coach through a secure platform.
2. The coach reviews the video through the lens of the CLASS framework and selects brief clips of effective practices accompanied by specific reflective prompts.
3. The teacher reviews the video clips and responds to the prompts.
4. The coach and teacher have a conference during which they reflect, set goals, and plan.
5. The coach creates a conference summary and action plan.

This cycle is repeated about every two weeks throughout the school year (Pianta et al., 2010).

While neither the coaching model nor the CLASS framework is explicit about promoting equity or increasing teacher awareness of implicit bias and institutionalized racism, their focus on student voice and agency does so implicitly.

The model focuses on individual interactions, prompting teachers to prioritize opportunities for each student to share thoughts, opinions, and thinking with the teacher and peers, which can increase awareness of each student's needs and increase everyone's access to connection and high-quality learning opportunities.

Indeed, research has demonstrated that the CLASS framework has power in closing one of education's most persistent equity problems, the racial discipline gap. In a recent study of 86 secondary classrooms, researchers found that when teachers improved on CLASS dimensions of emotional and instructional interactions, they reduced exclusionary discipline practices toward African American male students

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COACH-TEACHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Guiding questions for coach-teacher discussions based on the CLASS framework include:

- Do I have regular opportunities to check in with students about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences?
- Have I provided opportunities for choice, student leadership, and peer collaboration?
- Have I made the lesson and learning relevant and valuable for my students?
- What is the balance between teacher and student talk in my lessons?
- Have I provided opportunities for students to do the thinking: connecting previous and current learning, analyzing, comparing, generating, and reflecting?

These questions individually and collectively can help ensure that students feel valued and engaged in the learning.

(Gregory et al., 2016).

The researchers suggest that the CLASS framework's focus on awareness and responsiveness to individual social, emotional, and academic needs and emphasis on engaging, rigorous learning make the framework and My Teaching Partner-Secondary model equity implicit, especially benefitting the most vulnerable populations.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

In 2018, Lansing became one of the first three districts participating in a project to see if the achievement and behavioral effects from previous studies could be replicated. The project, and a research study within it, is being conducted by the American Institutes for Research, Learning Forward, and Teachstone, the organization that developed and facilitates the program's implementation.

Also participating in the first cohort of the project are Waco ISD in Texas and Louisa County Public Schools in Virginia. In 2019, the project team expanded the project to additional districts in California and Utah. In Lansing, we added coach Malikah Gregory to work with a new cohort of nine additional teachers.

To assess the outcomes of the program, the team is collecting multiple measures, including

structured, qualitative interviews with participating teachers, like Minor, as well as unstructured participation reflections with district coaches, like me. These important learnings align with the coaching program's process goals and provide insight into how the coaching model supports teachers to improve their interactions and practices. (Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all standardized testing measures intended to examine quantitative student outcomes are paused until 2022.)

While the study is ongoing, we in Lansing have already learned some lessons from both cohort one and two teachers about how My Teaching Partner-Secondary is improving teaching and learning, especially in building equity. Teachers' experiences have been overwhelmingly positive.

Adam Fedewa, a math teacher participating in cohort one, said, "Ultimately, what I have learned from the coaching and CLASS dimensions is so helpful for the students. It builds relationships with the kids. It has rejuvenated my teaching."

In our district, the CLASS framework is supporting student voice and equity in the way in which teachers are aware and responsive to student needs and how they plan opportunities for choice, leadership, and peer sharing.

These strategies convey to students, "I care about what you experience, say, and feel."

Instructionally, student voice and equity are present in how teachers plan and engage students, make connections with past learning, balance teacher-student talk, facilitate student dialogue, and challenge students to engage in higher-order thinking from brainstorming to analyzing and metacognitive reflection. A focus on these opportunities conveys to students, "I believe that you can engage in rigorous learning, and I care about what you think and say."

For example, Minor said, "As a teacher, I have grown in the area of including student voice in the classroom during instructional time as well as in assignments, connecting more of the math to the students' backgrounds and prior knowledge to help them see the relevancy of Algebra 2 in their lives."

Participating teachers' reflections highlight an essential element of increasing student voice: teacher confidence. When teachers feel effective in the classroom, they interact with students more positively (Pianta et al., 2010). In Lansing, as teachers' confidence increased with each cycle, they tried new CLASS relational and instructional behaviors, adding additional opportunities for student voice.

For example, Courtney McCampbell, a special education teacher, said, "I started focusing on what I was doing right and how to build on those skills. My coach, Malikah, helped guide me and come up with new ideas to help the kids. This increased my confidence as a teacher, which then allowed me to try new things in the classroom. I could see the voice and engagement in my classroom increase, and my joy of teaching went right along with it."

Jennifer Leroy, a cohort two English teacher, said the experience "validated my perspective as well as helped me grow. My coach spoke to my strengths, even as we discussed

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possible corrections through reflection, analysis, and clearly delineated goals aimed at strengthening student power and voice."

MAKING EVERYONE HEARD

A number of factors are shining a bright spotlight on inequity these days, especially the COVID-19 pandemic and protests against institutionalized racism and violence against people of color. These issues highlight the urgency of making everyone's voices heard and ensuring that all members of our school communities have agency.

At the same time, teaching and learning during this era present new challenges to engagement and access to learning opportunities. The emphasis on listening to students and interacting with them in supportive ways found in My Teaching Partner-Secondary can help us keep our focus on equity, even as we adapt to a new mode of learning.

Regardless of the student management system or video communication platform, this strengths-based model can promote intentional, authentic relationships. Those relationships are the foundation for all meaningful teaching and learning, from conversations about racism and social justice to real-world application of math and science concepts.

When we keep student voice at

the center of our practice, we prioritize equity and we ensure that we don't miss out on what the kids have to say.

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