



## HOW ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE INFLUENCES COACHING

BY EVTHOKIA STEPHANIE SACLARIDES

**G**iven the widespread implementation of instructional coaching, it is not surprising that coaching research has explored a variety of topics, including coaching roles and practices, coaches' preparation and ongoing learning, and coaching's impact on teachers and students across subjects such as literacy, mathematics, and technology. Yet little research has examined how academic discipline influences the way coaches work with teachers.

For example, given that elementary teachers often feel less confident in mathematics than literacy (Drake et al., 2001), might a coach approach a teacher differently when they are working on mathematics instruction

than when they are working on reading instruction? This is an important area of inquiry to ensure that coaches are most effectively supporting teaching and learning across a diverse range of academic disciplines at their schools.

In a recent study, I partnered with three coaches and six elementary teachers to better understand teachers' learning opportunities during one-on-one coaching (Saclarides, 2018; Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018), including whether those opportunities varied according to academic discipline.

The three instructional coaches were trained as generalists and expected to coach across all disciplinary areas (e.g. mathematics, literacy, social studies, and science) and all elementary grade levels.

Although the word “coach” can take on different meanings, here I refer to a coach as someone who works directly with teachers by engaging them in high-quality learning to enhance instruction and, ultimately, student learning (McGatha et al., 2015). Data sources included interviews with the principals, instructional coaches, and teachers, as well as observations of the coach-teacher dyads as they engaged in coaching cycles.

During the interviews, I asked coaches Meg, Claire, and Jade if they tended to coach teachers differently depending on the discipline — for example, whether they were coaching a teacher in literacy versus mathematics. (To protect participants' identities and in accordance with IRB regulations, all

names are pseudonyms.)

Despite the small size of this initial study, coaches' responses provide some insight that can inform coaches' and school leaders' reflections on their own coaching programs and also inform future research on this topic.

## HOW EXPERTISE MATTERS

Of the three coaches interviewed, one (Claire) reported no disciplinary differences in her coaching. The other two (Meg and Jade) did note some important coaching considerations across disciplines based on two factors: their own disciplinary expertise and teachers' comfort level with the discipline.

Meg said her expertise in mathematics, science, social studies, and technology made her feel more comfortable coaching teachers in these disciplines, whereas Jade said she felt more confident in literacy. But they reported using different coaching strategies when coaching in disciplinary areas in which they felt less confident.

Because she didn't perceive literacy and writing to be her strongest suits, Meg said she appreciated that her teachers could also seek support from the literacy interventionist at her school.

Jade, who was more comfortable with literacy than mathematics, said she was more likely to model a literacy lesson for teachers than a math lesson. In mathematics, she said, "I'm more willing to do some co-teaching with math and let them take the lead."

By sharing an instructional space and being jointly responsible for instruction, co-teaching a mathematics lesson likely removed some of the pressure from Jade that she would otherwise experience during modeling.

In addition to considering their own disciplinary expertise, the two coaches also weighed the importance of attending to teachers' disciplinary comfort level, given that elementary teachers are trained as generalists and expected to teach all disciplinary areas.

In particular, for disciplinary areas in which teachers felt less confident,

Meg said it was important to discuss the content first to give teachers a solid foundation on which to build when discussing pedagogy. She noted that teachers' underdeveloped content knowledge in mathematics and science could potentially negatively impact their instruction: "Do I understand it enough to teach it?"

Thus, when coaching teachers in the disciplinary areas of mathematics and science, Meg sought to deepen her teachers' content knowledge first before discussing how to most effectively teach that content to students: "Let's break this down to where you understand the parts, and then we can work on the delivery."

## IMPLICATIONS

Based on these initial findings from my small sample, I offer several factors for administrators and instructional coaches to consider as they seek to support coaches' professional learning opportunities while simultaneously building strong coaching programs at their schools.

- 1. Instructional coaches need access to ongoing and meaningful professional learning to deepen their content knowledge across multiple disciplines.** This is especially important for the many instructional coaches who are charged with supporting all content areas (e.g. literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, and technology).
- 2. Elementary schools might consider exploring content-focused coaching models.** In such a model, coaches would focus their coaching efforts in only one discipline, such as mathematics. Ultimately, this model could potentially capitalize on coaches' self-identified strengths by allowing coaches to focus their efforts on coaching in the academic discipline in which they feel most confident.

- 3. School-based leadership teams should identify and discuss their disciplinary strengths so they have a shared understanding of how to leverage them to best support teachers.** Regardless of coaches' comfort levels in each discipline, this makes for a stronger and more coherent approach to teacher and student support.

Overall, results from this small-scale study shed light on how academic discipline influences the way instructional coaches work with teachers. Future research should consider exploring this topic using a larger sample size of coaches while also seeking to incorporate the voices of teachers to better understand their perspectives.

## REFERENCES

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- Eythokia Stephanie Saclarides (saclares@ucmail.uc.edu) is an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati. ■**