

Within Alberta, the *Setting the Direction Framework* (Alberta Education, June 2009: p. 5) stresses that an inclusive education system is “a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance of, and belonging for, all students. Inclusive education in Alberta means a value-based approach to accepting responsibility for all students. It also means that all students will have equitable opportunity to be included in the typical learning environment or program of choice.”

The *Framework* is based on a principle that states “when stakeholders work together in a collaborative and purposeful way, more is accomplished for students” (Ibid: p. 5). The *Framework* establishes a foundation for building capacity that includes exploring provincial role descriptions and standards for school-based learning coaches, and supporting provincial professional learning opportunities for teachers to develop instructional strategies for inclusive education in schools and school authorities (Ibid: p. 9). Establishing access to school-based learning coaches was recommended by the Steering Committee of *Setting the Direction* as one way to build capacity to ensure that Alberta’s schools are equipped, resourced and ready to support and respond to the needs of all students in an inclusive way.

A literature search was undertaken in the fall of 2009 to explore the potential of instituting learning coaches in Alberta schools, as well as to discover the connection between inclusive education practices and school-based learning coaches.

UNDERSTANDINGS AND CONCEPTIONS

Although the concept of school-based coaches is receiving increased attention in the context of school improvement and inclusive education initiatives, the link or relationship between inclusive education and school-based coaching is not always explicitly or clearly defined in the literature. For the purpose of this review, instructional or learning coaches are defined as a professional development strategy in which coaches apply their expertise in subject areas or teaching approaches to individual teachers or small groups, with the goal of improving practice and ultimately increasing student achievement. A school-based learning coach focuses on instruction, student interactions and on the culture and environment provided in schools/ classrooms.

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In research, although some models of inclusion emphasize the special education teacher as a consultant, Austin (2001) points out that a growing body of literature recommends a team or collaborative model. This also is reflected in some of the following international literature on inclusive education that emphasizes co-teaching as a predominant form of school-based coaching.

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- *The Scotland Highland Council's Positive Behaviour Policy (September 2009, pp. 5–6) identifies the need to “provide high-quality inclusive education for all pupils to ... promote, amongst teachers and other staff, the development of coaching skills and an understanding of how to positively influence behaviour, rather than control it.”*
 - *In the United States, the use of school-based coaches has been linked to the No Child Left Behind Act as well as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, with more of a focus on the concept of co-teaching rather than on school-based coaching. Cook (2004) identifies co-teaching as an inclusive practice that delivers services to students with special needs, gives all students the opportunity to receive improved instruction (while minimizing instructional fragmentation), and gives teachers a sense of support when sharing a classroom. The District of Columbia Public Schools' School-Wide Applications Model (SAM) is a responsive intervention model that addresses both coaching and co-teaching as integral elements in meeting students' individual learning needs.*
 - *Much of the literature on co-teaching highlights the importance of sharing expertise and affecting practice. Anderson (2008: p. 11) identifies that benefits of co-teaching include “increased job satisfaction, blending of expertise and resources, and professional growth.”*
 - *In other research, school-based coaching emphasizes many of the same elements as co-teaching—a focus on student learning, collaboration and ongoing conversation, negotiated understandings and planning—although not typically or explicitly linked to inclusive education.*
 - *Sweeney (2009) outlines key elements in student-centered coaching, including that the focus is on a goal for student learning, conversations are driven by student work, coaching is organized into coaching cycles, and student-centered coaching depends upon leadership from the principal.*
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Conceptions from the research of school-based coaching and inclusive education help to identify attributes that focus on collaboration, professional relationship building and research-based support for the development and improvement of teaching practice in inclusive settings. The teachers' roles as coaches in inclusive education can be conceptualized in the context of teacher leadership. Billingsley (2007) describes an increasing interest in the importance of developing leadership skills that promote improved professional practice. Teacher leaders can be identified through their roles, activities or spheres of influence; e.g., teacher leaders within special education have specific responsibilities, and take on and influence problem-solving strategies and curriculum-based assessments.

The body of research on instructional technology coaching contributes to understanding the relationship of coaching to inclusive education. Jobe (2010) identifies instructional technology coaching as involving support for teachers “with the effective integration of laptops into their daily lessons to employ effective strategies and multiple technologies to reach all students and to enhance their learning.”

SCOPE OF PRACTICE

The assumptions and values that underlie instructional decision-making and practice regarding inclusive education are affected by the professional learning community in which teachers work. Meijer (2005: p. 13) points out that a European study found that “teachers mainly learn and develop their practice as a result of input from significant key people in their immediate environment: the head teacher, colleagues and professionals in or around the school.”

In recent literature relating to school-based coaching and collegial support structures, school-based coaches are site-based; provide professional development that emphasizes sustainability and transferability to instruction; are connected to school-based learning communities; and contribute to building instructional and leadership capacity. The roles and responsibilities of school-based coaches are explicitly tied to increasing student achievement; however, the quality and integrity of co-teaching models must be considered before student achievement outcomes can be effectively measured (Anderson, 2008: pp. 21–22).

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- *Borman & Feger (2006: p. 1) indicate that, in research and practice, there is considerable variability in the roles between instructional coaches, who help teachers refine and enhance their classroom practice; and school coaches, who work to support whole-school improvement.*
 - *The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (n.d.: p. 1) indicates that coaching supports the systemic improvement efforts of school communities and that learning must consist of structures and practices that are built into the everyday work of teachers or “job-embedded,” which is consistent with the principles of school-based coaching.*
 - *The Council of Directors of Education (CODE) Project (2007) in Ontario outlines evidence that supports the use of professional learning teams in developing capacity for improved student achievement and teacher professional practice.*
 - *The work of Billingsley (2007) suggests that special education teachers can provide leadership that supports and develops capacity with other educators within inclusive classrooms.*
 - *Literature on instructional technology coaching references what Glazer et al (2005: p.59) describes as a “community of practice,” in which collaboration involves shared repertoire and joint enterprise.*
 - *A study conducted by the IRIS Center for Training Enhancements (2009) outlines key roles of special educators in inclusive education such as co-teacher, team teacher, consulting teacher, facilitator, mediator, liaison, case manager, mentor for new teachers, and “go to” person. Many have parallels or explicit connections to the broad roles of advocacy and high expectations, collaboration, instruction, and support for school leaders that school-based coaches are expected to fulfill.*
 - *A case study conducted by Carrington & Robinson (2004: p. 145), using the United Kingdom’s Index for Inclusion, found that the role of a critical friend includes leadership, mentoring, provision of information and resources, and involvement in planning and development meetings. In contrast, peer mentoring requires a more equal relationship between colleagues in which both participants have knowledge and skills of value. The Index provides a framework for school review and development on the three dimensions of school culture, policy and practice.*
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Common characteristics of successful coaching teams include:

- having individual teachers voluntarily determine common or discipline-specific characteristics, knowledge and skills that they would like to improve;
- building professional relationships on parity, communication, respect and trust as well as a commitment to building and maintaining relationships;
- providing clearly defined classroom roles and responsibilities;
- ensuring support from administration; and
- planning ongoing professional learning activities.

EFFECTIVENESS OF COACHING

Although there is currently not a lot of research done to evaluate the relationship between coaching and student achievement, the literature does provide some qualitative indicators of success and impact on practice, particularly those that show teachers making sustained changes in their instructional practices.

Knight (2004: p. 2) indicates that when the right conditions are in place, including administrative support and highly qualified coaches, implementation of coaching is effective. The Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching shows evidence that teachers, who were regularly coached one-on-one, reported that they made significant changes in their instructional practices; their students were more engaged in the classroom and enthusiastic about learning; and class attendance increased dramatically.

Killion and Harrison (2006) identify that successful coaches understand effective instructional strategies and differentiated instruction; know how to align instruction with content; have strong teaching, classroom management, facilitation, questioning and higher-order thinking skills; are able to model; focus teachers on the big picture; and understand how students learn and teachers make decisions.

McLeskey and Waldron (2002) discuss the need to develop inclusive programs, including building support among staff and with administration, and recognizing the impact of change processes, a site-based focus and ongoing professional development. Meijer (2005) points out five variables effective for inclusive education:

- co-teaching or team teaching,
- cooperative learning,
- individualized planning,
- collaborative problem solving and differentiation,
- flexible and heterogeneous grouping

Paek (2008: p. 1) notes that when asset-based instruction capitalizes on teacher and student strengths, there is a cultural shift leading to positive self-efficacy and improvement in performance. In the Ontario CODE (2007) project, school and district teams frequently reported that the greatest improvement in teaching practice was within an environment, created by the principal, in which collaboration and school-based coaching flourished.

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Sweeney (2009) discusses the importance of *coaching cycles*, which provide an organizational structure for ongoing support that allows for collaboration over a sustained period of time.

USING ASSESSMENT DATA

The literature on school-based coaching generally focuses on assessment as either a tool that teachers should be taught to use more effectively, or as a means to assess the impact of coaching initiatives on teachers' practice.

In Ontario (Lynch and Aslop, 2007: p. 2), there are documented approaches that literacy coaches take to improve teacher evaluation of student achievement. The use of student assessment data is a key component of student-focused coaching, a model of instructional coaching that uses assessment data to make modifications to the instructional process. In a study on the effectiveness of coaching, Denton, Swanson and Mathe (2007) found that coaches frequently answered teachers' questions related to assessment; suggested that teachers implement specific instructional strategies based on assessment results; engaged teachers in examining assessment results and observing students for specific purposes; and provided feedback and encouragement to teachers about student progress based on assessment results.

Some of the literature on technology coaching draws out the connection between effective application of technology and increased student achievement. The eTech Ohio (2006: p. 2) initiative points out that, when applied to well-defined educational objectives and integrated into the curriculum by trained teachers, educational technology can help improve student achievement and the development of 21st century skills.

A European study on assessment in inclusive education (Watkins, 2007) identified conditions that are necessary to plan for inclusive assessment, including flexibility to facilitate collaboration, partnership and effective communication between teachers, and strategies for peer support for teachers to share positive experiences, have opportunities for joint consideration and use teacher-peer modification of assessment information.

The CODE Project (2007) adopted a coaching model that supported school boards across Ontario in improving learning and achievement for students with special education needs, and established benchmarks, tracked student achievement and reported that school-based coaching changed instructional practice, resulting in a noticeable impact on student achievement.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Support for planning and instruction is a key role in school-based coaching and although there are numerous examples in literature about school-based or instructional coaching, there is very little indication of the types of instructional planning and modelling approaches that are most effective in inclusive education coaching contexts.

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- *Saphier and West (2009: p. 46) describe the primary role of school-based coaches as one that raises the quality of the teaching and learning in every classroom in the school by building a culture in which teaching is public... , planning is thorough and collaborative... and [teacher] conversations and questions about improving student results... are constant, evidence-based and non-defensive."*
 - *Implications for inclusive education include: 1) Knight's (2007) "big four" framework of behaviour, content, instruction and formative assessment for organizing interventions and providing focus to coaching practice; 2) the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's (n.d.: p. 3) three key components (structural conditions, a guided, content-based focus on adult learning, and instructional leadership) for a well-designed coaching system; and 3) coaches who engage in classroom-based approaches and activities supported by school-based coaching (Annenberg Institute for School Reform (n.d.: p. 2); Borman and Feger (2006: p. 5); CODE Special Education Project (2007).*
 - *Billingsley (2007: p. 168) notes that teachers who are "mentors not only contribute to new teachers' learning and transition to teaching, but they also benefit, as teachers learn how to observe, provide feedback and think critically about their own teaching practices."*
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The Iris Center for Training Enhancements (2009: p. 2) recommends that special education educators should take part in co-teaching and teaming and should have the following skills that allow them to carry out roles and responsibilities with general educators and all school staff:

- communication,
- consultation,
- collaboration,
- facilitation,
- mediation,
- reflective listening,
- networking

When these partnerships provide each partner with opportunities for teaching and learning, they may have more sustained implications for coaching models in inclusive classrooms.

An additional dimension of school-based coaching is the concept of behavioural or interventional coaching, which involves an expert in a specific behavioural or academic area collaborating with the classroom teacher around the proper design, implementation and evaluation of the interventions. Learning coaches may provide classroom demonstrations, constructive verbal feedback, modelling opportunities, follow-up support, direct assistance to the teacher, and classroom observations (Knight, 2007). Coaches must make it clear that they are not evaluating the teacher during the coaching process. Ern, Head & Anderson (2009: p. 22) believe that school psychologists serve as non-evaluative coaches because of their expertise in both academic and behavioural areas, and suggest that school psychologists, or other intervention-focused coaches, need to follow steps to clarify, synthesize, 'break it down', 'see it through a teacher's eyes' and simplify (p. 23) when they take on a coaching role.

The role of technology in facilitating coaching processes is explored by Rock et al (2009) who document the use of technology tools, including wireless headsets, webcams and Skype, to

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provide virtual coaching in the classroom. Goodman et al (2008) document that “bug-in-ear” technology to provide immediate, in-class feedback and coaching to novice teachers, had a greater impact on teachers’ behaviour than traditional feedback; e.g., feedback that is provided hours, days or even weeks after a teacher is observed. Jobe (2010) identifies that instructional technology coaches should guide and support teachers in implementing technology; bring their own experience and success in using technology into their instruction; be part of the school’s leadership team (providing timely, embedded and ongoing professional development); support staff in developing capacity to integrate instructional technology; use data to make informed instructional choices; and promote instruction that is differentiated for students.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is inherently embedded in, as well as external to, the scope of practice of school-based coaches. Much of the literature on school-based coaching agrees with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (n.d.: p. 2) that “a well-designed and supported coaching program weaves core elements of effective professional development with the essential goals of professional learning communities in ways that advance both school and systemic improvement.” The Institute emphasizes the fact that instructional coaching is one element of professional development, not the only answer. Billingsley (2007: p. 168) suggests that “providing access to high-quality induction and mentoring programs is a critical leadership responsibility, and ... teacher leaders can assist with new teacher orientation, mentoring, professional development and peer support meetings.”

Some literature on inclusive education discusses professional learning that incorporates principles related to school-based coaching. McLeskey and Waldron (2002) found that teacher involvement makes it more likely that the ownership for the inclusive school will be broadly based and that the changes will be widely accepted among the teaching staff. The Ontario CODE (2007) findings emphasized that professional development must be ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers’ classroom work with students, and focused on research-based approaches to support increased achievement of all students. Professional learning support for the coaches, leaders and administration also is identified as an important element of effectiveness with school-based coaching programs.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADMINISTRATION

There is overwhelming agreement in the literature on inclusive education, school-based coaching and co-teaching that one of the most significant factors of success relates to the degree of leadership and support from the principal and school or district administration. Spark Innovation (n.d.: p. 11) provides an example of the crossovers that can exist between the responsibilities of a principal and a coach; e.g., the principal and coach calibrate their view of coaching and the coach’s roles and responsibilities; they define student-centered coaching for teachers and invite their participation; and they commit to weekly or biweekly planning meetings.

Cohen (n.d.: p. 4) identifies the range of tasks for which principals can take responsibility to create a supportive technology coaching environment: support coaching as a building-

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wide professional development strategy, foster a culture where it is okay to ask for help, and take responsibility for framing how coaches and collaborating teachers approach their work. According to Saphier and West (2009: p 47) the coach is the primary (and only) role in the present system designed specifically to improve instruction by working side-by-side with teachers on all aspects of the instructional core. Billingsley (2007) indicates the need for more research on teacher leadership in special education to help administrators understand how the expertise and influence of special education leaders can enhance instructional practice.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Billingsley (2007: p. 171) identifies the lack of administrative support and attention to collaborative cultures as one of the fundamental barriers to implementing leadership within inclusive educational settings. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (n.d.: pp. 4–7) outlines the following challenges that impact the effectiveness of coaching initiatives:

- too much focus on the classroom isolates coaching from systemic goals;
- if coaching is the only form of professional learning, there is the risk of creating isolated pockets of effective teaching and learning in individual schools;
- coaching models that work in elementary schools will often not work in secondary schools;
- coaching can fail to reach resistant teachers;
- school and central office supports often are underused or inaccessible;
- coaching programs often lack assessment indicators and systematic documentation of impact;
- a focus on process limits the rigorous analysis of data and content;
- coaching often focuses on broad strategies to the exclusion of differentiation and equity;
- learning must occur at all levels with commitment not only from the school but also from district leadership.

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CONCLUSION

While the concept of learning coaches has become more common in recent years, it is still a relatively new topic of interest in a school-based context, particularly in an inclusive environment. What appears to be emerging is that school-based coaching has the potential to support inclusive education when the right conditions are in place. The literature provides qualitative indicators of success, citing the importance of building support among staff and with administration (e.g., collaboration and ongoing conversations, negotiated understandings and planning), and recognizing the impact of change processes, a site-based focus and ongoing professional development, as being factors in effective inclusive education that are similar to those necessary to implement successful school-based coaching models. In the literature, school-based coaching is explicitly tied to increasing student achievement, instruction is centred on student interactions and the school/classroom culture and environment, and there is a culture of professional collaboration that increases teachers’ sense of efficacy, job satisfaction and teaching performance.

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