Instructional Coaching – Does it Really Work?

By Leah Anyanwu

The Learner-Centred Teaching Thematic cluster in RELI Kenya, an initiative sponsored by Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, convened to discuss school-based coaching and its role on improving student learning outcomes. Representatives from Dignitas, PAL Network, Women Educational Researchers of Kenya (WERK), Zizi Afrique, Africa Education Trust (AET), Dupoto-e-Maa and Lwala Community Alliance (via skype) attended the session. The workshop explored instructional coaching, challenges to implementing it with fidelity, and ended with a roundtable discussion. Contributing to the discussion featuring Rebecca Crook, co-founder of Metis, Patrick Ndungu, a curriculum support officer from the Teachers’ Service Commission, and Martin Odhiambo, an instructional coach from RTI / Women Educational Researchers of Kenya (WERK) through the Tusome Early Grade Reading Program in Nairobi.

What is instructional coaching?

Instructional coaching is the intentional and ongoing practice intended to support learning and develop new skills and capacities between two individuals. Coaching can also be between a coach and a group of coachees (group coaching). Coaching has been proven to improve teacher performance and acts as a bridge between theory and practice. Instructional coaching has been widely researched in the United States, but data on coaching in the African context is still being developed. Ben Piper reports that, “Research on in-school teacher pedagogical support is rare in Kenya and other developing countries. The limited evidence from available studies that we examined suggested that even short-term instructional coaching could lead to teacher behavior change.” Coaching may be particularly effective in developing countries because of the limited formal education and in-service professional development opportunities available to the average teacher.
What are the barriers to implementation?
Implementing instructional coaching at scale is a challenge. Several organizations present had various coaching aspects in their programming and unanimously agreed that coaching is labor intensive. Furthermore, coaches face resistance from teachers. Teachers can be unwilling to receive or implement feedback and some fear that coaching is a form of surveillance. Many institutions do not understand what coaching entails. This lack of clarity and trust can yield speculation and resistance. Furthermore, when coaching is linked to performance management, the results can be harmful to teacher performance and to the coaching relationship. Programs implementing coaching also noted that time allocation threatens quality implementation. Schools and organizations alike are trying to maximize time and coaching is only successful when the meeting time is prioritized and kept sacred.

Which factors affect coaching effectiveness?
Humans are dynamic. As a result, coaching teachers requires consistency and norming to achieve comparable impact across schools. One factor affecting coaching is the ratio of teachers to each instructional coach. Coaching conversations take time and the coach has to be able to routinely support all teachers for there to be consistent growth. When a coach is expected to support a heavy load of teachers, their support can deteriorate. Moreover, coaching varies in approach. To address the time challenge, some organizations leverage group coaching to support more teachers. However, group coaching lacks the depth of individual coaching. Additionally, coaching varies in the content delivered. Coaches can support specific subjects or general best pedagogical practices. Subject specific coaches are able to offer technical support to teachers while general coaches check for the use of best pedagogical practices (e.g., student engagement, lesson planning). Finally, not all coaches can effectively build relationships across the teachers they support. Differences in culture, age, and background all affect coaching. Combined, the above factors influence the effectiveness of coaching at the program level.

How can we measure the impact of instructional coaching?
While data on instructional coaching is limited, each organization approached measuring impact differently. To accurately measure the impact of instructional coaching, there needs to be a clear baseline on particular performance areas. In example, were teachers lesson planning? Were learners engaged? Collecting robust baseline data will allow organizations to measure the impact of instructional coaching. Coaches need to collect anecdotal qualitative evidence from the field. This could include success stories from the teacher or observations in change of teacher practice. By collecting and disseminating stories from the field, organizations can tell a cohesive story of impact. Since teacher performance directly impacts student performance, measuring student performance is another indicator to potentially measure the effects of coaching. Lastly, teacher and coach self-reflection is another opportunity to measure the impact of coaching. When teachers are constantly prompted to self-reflected, they can identify areas of growth and describe the impact of the provided coaching support.
So what needs to happen to implement coaching at scale?

After the panel discussion, the participants brainstormed the next steps required in order to improve instructional coaching and to support its implementation. One potential next step is creating a centralized curriculum for all instructional coaches. It is important to think about the support structures provided to coaches and to norm on a shared definition for coaching and mentoring. Various non-state actors should share their approach to coaching to help other institutions improve coaching implementation. Since coaching is relatively new to this context, sharing materials will prevent organizations from reinventing the same thing. As the implementation of instructional coaching increases, coaches need access to additional training, professional development, and support.

Moreover, there needs to be a common tool that organizations who implement coaching can use. This tool can collect the common indicators and include probing questions that coaches can ask. Based on the conversation about leveraging technology, one participant recommended leveraging technology to ease implementation. The use of tablets or smart phones will allow coaches to collect qualitative and quantitative data from the field. Coaches can then share this data and feedback with the organization and with the teacher. This tool could also include additional tools that the coach could use to support the coaching conversation in the field. In example, there could be a document with potential probing questions or strategies to try. The tool could also access a shared data base of best practices that could be shared with the teacher. Technology can help to strengthen the systems used to measure coaching while providing access to additional resources to support coaching.

Finally, accountability must be shared between the coach, the teacher, and the broader school community. Challenges should be addressed collectively and teachers should feel ownership over their growth and development. Organizations can reflect on additional next steps required to set coaches up for success. Moreover, school leaders must be on board and briefed by the coach before coaching begins. Mapping different coaching models and best practices will help organizations learn from each other. Organizations can cultivate strong teachers in each school as potential peer coaches. In the case of RTI, the initial coaching session aims to groom an institutional coach promoting a cascaded coaching model. In all, with thorough planning and implementation, instructional coaching can add value to educational organizations and has the potential to greatly impact student learning outcomes.