

The Last Word



Throughout my career as a teacher and leader, I worked primarily in middle schools.

However, when I first became a Principal, I found myself leading an elementary school despite having no previous experience as an elementary teacher. My only exposure to elementary teaching was a brief stint subbing for a kindergarten class as a TTOC (Teacher Teaching On-Call) one afternoon. It was a disastrous experience that my colleagues still tease me about today.

As is true for any Principal, I was responsible for overseeing all aspects of the school and ensuring high levels of academic achievement for all students. This was a challenging task, as I had little understanding of how to create successful learning environments for primary and intermediate aged students, and no personal experience as an elementary teacher. I felt hesitant to ask the kindergarten teachers to share their literacy programs with me, as I lacked the context that a kindergarten teacher needs to fully comprehend the approach and its effectiveness.

This past fall, I enrolled in the Organizational Coaching Program at the University of British Columbia. Unfortunately, life has gotten in the way, and for now my participation in the program is on hold. However, what I have experienced in the program so far has led me to wish that



Cultivating Coaching Conversations

I understood the power and impact of coaching conversations when working as an elementary Principal all those years ago. I believe that incorporating coaching strategies into my leadership could have helped me to better support and guide teachers, ultimately leading to better outcomes for our students.

One of the main reasons I was drawn to UBC's coaching program was because I wanted to develop and enhance the BCPVPA's Mentoring Program. For more than five years, the BCPVPA has trained mentors to work with our newer members early in their careers. While the program has been successful, I have often wondered if we could improve the program by adding more elements of coaching.

Mentoring and coaching are both forms of development in which an experienced individual helps

another person to grow and improve. However, they differ in a few key ways.

Mentoring is a long-term relationship in which the mentor provides guidance, support, and advice to the mentee over an extended period. Coaching, on the other hand, is more focused on specific goals and is often more short-term. A coach works with the individual to help them develop the skills and knowledge they need to achieve a specific objective. Coaching tends to be more action-oriented and goal-focused, and the coach helps the individual to develop a plan of action to achieve their goals.

All those years ago, it would have been quite presumptuous of me, as a 'fish out of water' Principal, to approach our kindergarten teachers to share with me their strategies for developing emerging literacy skills in their students. My own



lack of experience and understanding of the context for our earliest learners would have been sadly on display. However, if I had taken more of a coaching approach to the process and conversations, I wonder if I could have offered a more positive influence.

Coaching conversations between Principals and teachers could foster an effective way to support teacher development and improve student learning outcomes. To structure these conversations effectively, Principals could consider the following tips:

1. Set clear goals and expectations: In

advance of the conversation, it is important for the Principal to have a clear understanding of the goals and expectations for the coaching conversation. This could include desired outcomes, or next steps for the teacher.

2. Create a safe and supportive environment:

Coaching conversations should be conducted in a safe and supportive environment where teachers feel comfortable and empowered to share their thoughts and ideas. This may involve creating a confidential space, setting ground rules for the conversation, and using positive and non-judgmental language.

3. Use open-ended questions: Open-ended questions can be a powerful tool for guiding a coaching conversation. They encourage teachers to think critically about their practice and to share their thoughts and ideas.

4. Focus on the teacher's strengths: While coaching conversations may address areas for improvement, it is important to also focus on the teacher's strengths and successes. This can help to build teacher confidence and motivation.



5. Use active listening: Active listening involves fully engaging with the teacher and showing interest in their perspective. This can involve restating or summarizing what the teacher has said, asking follow-up questions, and avoiding distractions.

6. Provide actionable feedback: Feedback should be specific, objective, and actionable. It should focus on the teacher's behaviours and practices, rather than their personal characteristics.

7. Follow up: After the coaching conversation, it is important for the Principal to follow up with the teacher to check on their progress and provide additional support as needed. This may involve setting up additional coaching sessions, or providing resources or other support.

In one of my sessions with a mentor coach through UBC's program, I was struck by his perspective that the coach's 'dumbness' can actually be a superpower. While I was concerned about my lack of knowledge of the kindergarten curriculum and the learning needs of our youngest students, my mentor-coach would suggest that the lack of knowledge and understanding can free the coach from any bias or assumptions. Focusing on open-ended questions as opposed to content specific questions could also encourage a more effective coaching conversation to help assist the teacher's development.

Below are a few examples of coaching questions that Principals could use, and I am sure that you will have great examples of your own:

1. What is most important to you in your teaching right now?
2. What do you see as your biggest challenges or obstacles in your teaching?
3. How do you envision your teaching evolving over the next year or two?
4. What are your goals for your teaching, and how can I support you in achieving them?
5. What resources or support do you need to help you achieve your goals?
6. What small steps can you take to move towards your goals?

7. How can you celebrate your progress and accomplishments along the way?

8. What are some strategies you have used in the past that have been successful for you?

9. What might you try differently in the future to achieve your goals?

10. How can we work together to create a supportive and empowering environment for your students, and your development as a teacher?

While I still have a great deal to learn about coaching, I can see the potential for school leaders to use coaching tools to help build a positive and supportive school culture, as coaching can promote a collaborative and growth-oriented approach to professional development. Overall, coaching tools can be a powerful means for Principals to support the development and growth of their teachers, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes.

Kevin Reimer is the Executive Director of the BCPVPA, a previous Director of the Board and served as President 2016-2018.

Share your proven approaches to coaching conversations, and your own examples of coaching questions that have supported teacher development.

What kind of feedback have you received, and what have you noticed?



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