Center for Education Policy Research
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

National Center for Teacher Effectiveness

Newsletter Feature

Researcher Shares Insights on Teacher Coaching

Transcript of interview with Dr. Matthew Kraft, Co-Principal Investigator of the NCTE project, Developing Common Core Classrooms through Rubric-Based Coaching

1. **Please describe the field of work that you research.**
   Most broadly, my research interests are related to trying to measure and improve teacher effectiveness and school organizational capacity, environments, quality of the culture in schools, particularly in urban public schools. One way in which I've focused on helping teachers to support instruction is through teacher coaching. The evidence on teacher professional development has started to help us identify specific elements of a professional development that are important components to a successful training program, but broadly, most have programs been ineffectual. However, some recent evidence from rigorous evaluations of teacher coaching models, particularly in literacy and early elementary education, have found really promising evidence of the potential for teacher coaching models.

   The work with Heather [Hill] and Corinne [Herlihy] is drawing on the promising initial results of some early analyses of teacher coaching models and my own interests in professional development as a way to improve teacher effectiveness. I think that the conversations at the national and state level are largely focused on teacher evaluation. Does this mean that evaluation is for helping us to select the best teachers and retain them, deselect underperforming teachers and remove them from the profession, or potentially provide feedback to all teachers in the class-room and help them improve? And can we do those at the same time, or are they mutually exclusive? I think those are all interesting and open questions. Most of my work is focused on improving teachers' practice. We have 3.5 million teachers in the classroom—we can't fire and rehire them all, nor would I argue that we want to. Instead, can we leverage our emerging research base to find ways to develop sustained intensive cycles of observation and feedback?

2. **Why are you interested in the Coaching project? How does it relate to your work on the school context?**
   Some of my first work with coaching has been with the MATCH charter school in Boston and their own efforts to train novice teachers, or teachers in training. A primary focus of what they

do is to give teachers lots of "at-bats," or opportunities to practice instructional moves or routines, while recording and watching their instruction and providing feedback.
I think back to when I was teaching eighth and ninth grade, and how infrequently anyone besides my students set foot in my classroom, how I never received meaningful feedback on my own instruction, and how much I would have benefitted from that feedback and really I wished I had similar coaching.

My own personal experience teaching, combined with seeing the practices at MATCH and helping them to evaluate the rollout of a coaching model in New Orleans that's much different than what we're studying. It's very generalized instructional practices across subjects and grades for early career teachers to help them establish a healthy learning environment, manage time and classroom behavior. Now that interest—in working with Heather so long and intensely about math-specific content practices—can we use the same delivery model, the coaching model, to capitalize on what Heather and her colleagues have developed on the rich set of knowledge of what high quality math instruction, can we help teachers move in that direction.

3. **What is the added benefit of coaching as opposed to professional development?**
I think it's very much human nature is to perceive one's own experience and situation as unique, *"What I'm doing is different than other," or "My kids are special and need a particular approach."* One of the big challenges with professional development is that it's hard for teachers to apply general advice to a specific context, to localize it. What coaching does is it skips that general step to provide feedback that is contextualized to the environment in which teachers are working. [Providing such feedback] has greater potential for both teacher buy-in and to provide feedback that is immediately actionable. Teachers will know what they can try next week as an alternative step to address a challenge or illustrate a complex concept.
In addition, I think that because the coaching is between two individuals, it allows for more active participation among teachers in the training process. Teachers are pushed and encouraged to more actively reflect on their practice by watching and reviewing it, and coaches can push the conversation by asking guided targeted questions, rather than just making prescriptions. I think any time that you can increase the level of active participation in anything, you're going to increase buy-in of the content and retention of ideas. I think those are the advantages that coaching models have over traditional professional development programs.

The coaching will take place this academic year and [we'll be] developing materials to train coaches that we've recruited. Not only do we need coaches to be expert raters on MQI [the Mathematical Quality of Instruction rubric], but they have to know how to observe practice, assess it using the framework of MQI, lead sometimes difficult conversations around what they see, encourage teachers to be self-reflective, and have the ability to identify specific, actionable areas for improvement.

4. **Who are the coaches and what makes them qualified to serve in this role?**
    In some ways this is an open and empirical question. We don't know a lot about who is a good coach and what makes for a good coach. The scale at which we're doing this means that we will have more than 25 coaches. Out of necessity, they will have a varied set of background characteristics. All of them will be highly trained on using the MQI as a rubric to assess instructional practice. The vast majority, if not all, will have had advanced training in mathematics, either as an experience as a math teacher, completed a mathematics undergraduate degree, worked in community college, taught math at the college level, but there will be a range where the expertise lies.

    Unlike MQI *raters*, the pool of MQI *coaches* is going to be recruited to have had classroom teaching experience in K–12, particularly in urban public schools. We're looking for folks who have lived practice of being in classroom combined with expertise in mathematics instruction in order to deliver high quality coaching. We also specifically recruited people who had prior experience as coaches, mentor teachers, or teacher advisors. Not everyone will have that, but many will.

5. **What have you learned from this project so far?**
    One thing that is important and exciting is that our recruitment efforts to get teachers to sign on to participate in the study—to have the opportunity to receive coaching—have been very successful. I think there's something to learn from that. Teachers are willing and eager to receive what they perceive as high quality professional development. This project is an intensive process of up to 15 coaching cycles, where teachers are videotaping instruction, sending it to a coach and having bi-weekly conversations of up to an hour or more, and reviewing their own instruction and watching other teachers' short clips. These teachers are willing to give up their own time, 3–5 hours every two weeks, to participate in this program, not because their principal told them they had to, or their district said they should, but out of their own voluntary interest. I think that that speaks to the lack of quality professional development that they do have access to and the professionalism of teachers and their interest in improving their practice.

    Another thing we've learned is that there's not a lot about training coaches. That is, how do you take folks who are interested in being a coach and help them to improve their skills? We've had to develop a lot of that [content] ourselves and I think we'll continue to refine it as we receive real-time feedback from coaches about what they think is working and what isn't.

6. **How are administrators involved in this? Is this part of the program?**
    The training starts with a summer group training session that is focused on helping teachers familiarize themselves with the MQI Instrument, doing some support work around technology, how you videotape, how you use the equipment, and how you use the online

platform. There will be some district folks to be linked into this, but this is not leveraging administrators in a major way, in part because it's a research-based platform for coaching.

In practice, I think many districts [implement] something they call coaching that might be much more like "coaching light," with principals or administrators. Principals often have to wear two hats as an evaluator and instructional leader. This study is helping to crystallize the extremely large gap between tasking principals to be an instructional coach on all subjects in all grades in their school, on top of all their responsibilities, vs. training in-depth, content-specific coaches in a role that is primarily about professional improvement, where principals often have to wear two hats as an evaluator and instructional leader.

7. **Is there anything in the process of designing this project that you think could inform practitioners who are designing coaching in their schools?**
In some ways, this is a narrow study because it's an efficacy trial. [We are asking,]
"Can a fairly well-resourced group organize a cohort of coaches to work with teachers to improve their practice and raise student achievement?" If the answer is yes, then it's worthwhile to answering the question you asked, how do we translate this to a larger scale roll-out? In practice, I think this opens the door not to not necessarily doing this through the administrative staff, because it's a web-based coaching model, so one can envision a core team of expert coaches that are developed and you can connect to from anywhere in the country because it's web-based; we're hearing at least anecdotally from teachers that there's something attractive about that because they are not your local peers or your administrators, they're just someone kind of off in the ether" who's an expert and can help you reflect [in a way that] feels a little more secure.

My own personal opinion—once we've done the study we'll have the data from the study to back this up one way or another—is that there are some real logistical and capacity challenges to relying on administrators to assume the roles of coaches, even if we think coaching is beneficial. [If we find that] dedicated, expert coaches who deliver year-long intensive cycles of coaching, that we've found improve student achievement, means that we should ask principals to now, when they can, pop in and give some feedback. Not that that's a bad thing, but I don't think we can expect that to have the same impact that we might find on something that's a model like the one that we're doing. That said, I'm certain there are things we can do to better support and train administrators to develop their instructional observation and feedback skills. This is not my area of expertise but I certainly perceive that that's not an area of emphasis in principal training programs, and those kind of adult development conversations are difficult ones.

8. **How does this connect to your work on school context?**
My work around school organizational context is really asking a broader question: "How can we help support teachers to be more effective?" The motivation for that question is the same

motivation for the coaching study with a different approach. [In the coaching study] the intervention is at the individual teacher level, but the school organizational context research argues that intervening with individual teachers alone might not be sufficient to help teachers reach their full potential. This is because no matter how much great coaching I got, how much I know, what I could potentially do, if I'm holding kids to certain behavioral standards that the principal doesn't support, or there are inconsistent norms across classrooms, or I don't trust my peers to have conversations with me about giving me more feedback, then I might not be working in an environment that maximizes my own potential.

So [my school organization context] work is asking questions about what adults in schools, administrators, teachers, counselors, can do as a collective to strengthen school capacity, [such as] having high academic expectations for kids collectively, having strong peer relationships among teachers to support each other and give feedback and hold each other to high professional standards, and having an organized set of norms and expectations around safety and order and behavior in the school. [Both strands of research are] ultimately about helping teachers to be the most effective teachers they can be, but one is an individual intervention and one is an organizational intervention.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

The National Center for Teacher Effectiveness (NCTE), housed at the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, is a five-year project with the goal of joining research and practice to accelerate the search for valid, scalable measures of teacher and teaching effectiveness. NCTE is a national research and development center funded by the Institute of Education Science.

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