

Insight into Instructional Coaching

Cynthia Leann Emery

Manhattan-Ogden USD 383, Manhattan, Kansas

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to gain insight into the startup cycle of an instructional coaching responsibilities in a school district. These case studies show both success and setbacks as an honest and transparent look into instructional coaching.

Keywords

instructional coaching, primary grades, intermediate grades

Introduction: My Story as a Coach

Instructional coaches help educators set and achieve self-selected goals, empower educators and students, and offer support and resources until the goal is met. They also partner with educators to help them improve teaching and learning so students become more successful. In a mid-sized district, our new instructional coaches have been vital in implementing new core curriculum, facilitating professional learning sessions, and sharing feedback and models of lessons.

My fellow coaches and I seek to make coaching an effective support for our teachers. I work in four elementary schools with a wide range of student and teacher backgrounds and experiences. To showcase the cycles, I selected two teachers as case studies because they were both new to teaching in an elementary setting, but they each had a background in working with children in other contexts. I wanted to look at how my coaching might be different in primary and intermediate grades and to reflect on how my coaching cycles unfold when working with different personalities. Notes taken during or shortly after conversations with teachers or administrators have provided helpful insight as I've analyzed my interactions and coaching approach with the two teachers during the implementation of instructional coaching. Names and identifying information has been changed to protect the identities of individuals.

In this practitioner piece, I will explain the Impact Cycle used for instructional coaching. Each section following will highlight my interactions with a primary and an intermediate teacher I have worked with this school year as well as my reflections.

The Impact Cycle

The process we use for instructional coaching is called the Impact Cycle, and it is composed of three steps: identify, learn, and improve (Knight, 2018). Developed by Jim Knight, the Impact Cycle is designed to foster collaboration and goal setting between a teacher and an instructional coach to improve instructional practice. In three steps, coaches offer support and resources throughout the process until the goal is met:

- In the **identify** step, the goal is to gain a clear picture of reality and identify student-focused goals with academic achievement, student engagement, and classroom management. Together, coaches and educators decide on a goal and a strategy to meet the goal.
- In the **learn** step, educators and coaches implement a strategy by modeling, co-teaching, trying the strategy, or using a checklist or other tools. This section can be broken up into smaller, more manageable steps to help teachers meet their goal.

- In the **improve** step, ask: Was the goal met? The teacher and coach monitor progress and make changes to the goal or strategy used as needed. Plans and actions continue until the goal is met (Knight, 2018).

Entry into Coaching

In two selected cases, the teachers entered the coaching cycle in different ways. Ms. Jones reached out to me for help as soon as school started, whereas I asked to observe Ms. Lark. The teachers had very different challenges in their classrooms and required different approaches to accommodate their needs.

Primary Teacher: Since she was new to the district, I approached a first-year primary teacher, Ms. Lark, at the beginning of the school year in August 2018 to observe her class during her ELA block. She was accepting of me coming in to observe, and reported that she felt like things were going well with her students. My first observation occurred in the second week of school. During the lesson, many students were engaged in a conversation with other students, and the teacher had to say the name of a student multiple times to get their attention. Throughout the lesson, I identified only a few students fully engaged in the lesson activities.

Intermediate Teacher: About this same time, I was approached by a second-year intermediate teacher, Ms. Jones, to start a coaching cycle. After a difficult first year, she was determined to have a better year, and she asked if I would observe her teaching. Ms. Jones' biggest concerns were implementing the new core ELA curriculum and classroom management. My initial observations during her ELA block revealed that her students were generally engaged in the lesson, and she had some management strategies in place to prevent student misbehavior.

Teachers' Perceptions and Expectations

After my first observations of these two teachers during their ELA blocks, I hypothesized what I thought they would select for their goals. Based on my conversations with Ms. Jones and Ms. Lark before observing, I thought Ms. Jones' goal would likely be centered around student engagement and Ms. Lark would choose to focus on classroom management. One prediction was correct and one was not. The teachers' perceptions and expectations of their teaching aligns with the identify step of the Impact Cycle as outlined above.

Primary Teacher: When I met with Ms. Lark to discuss her lessons, her perception was that her teaching and classroom management were fine. She felt that things were going well and rated her performance during the observation at a "seven out of ten." Yet after her formal administrative evaluation, the principal raised concerns about student learning and classroom management and told Ms. Lark she was required to enter into a coaching cycle with me. When we met again, we set a goal for better student engagement. Ms. Lark expressed to me that she wanted to improve her teaching because she cared about her students and loved her job.

Intermediate Teacher: Immediately after my first observation, Ms. Jones set her first goal around student engagement: *Students will be engaged during ELA tier one time, 40%-50% of students raising hands, 60% annotating and answering questions in the book according to expectation.* Ms. Jones knew that true engagement was more than students raising their hands but this seemed like a logical first step for her to increase engagement. She shared her expectations for speaking, listening, annotating, and answering questions (verbally and in writing) with her students verbally and in writing. We discussed ways she could measure progress toward her goal. Her ideas included implementing rubrics for annotations and written responses, collecting student workbooks to check annotation and observing the number of students raising their hands each day. We meet regularly to discuss observations and progress.

Reflections: At this point, I recognized that Ms. Lark did not understand what it looked like when she was teaching. Ms. Lark did not voluntarily enter into the coaching cycle with me, and she was required to work with me. When people feel they don't have a choice in whether or not they do something, they may resist or act compliant without sustaining real change (Knight, 2018). In contrast, Ms. Jones is more aware of her strengths and weaknesses. She has more experience teaching and is more knowledgeable about effective practices in reading instruction. I did not have to guide Ms. Jones and we were able to have great dialogue about strategies that would be effective in improving student learning.

Launch into Learning

In the identify step of the impact cycle I asked the identify questions written by Jim Knight in his book *The Impact Cycle* (Knight, 2018). These questions helped teachers set a self-selected goal, provided the teachers a chance to reflect on their own teaching, and allowed them to choose a goal that was compelling. The questions were intentionally written to move the dialogue towards constructive conversation grounded in reality (or the teacher's perception of reality) and focus on how to best help students. In this step, the teachers identified what they needed to improve in their teaching by answering questions such as "What would your students be doing differently if that lesson was a 10 on your rating scale?" and "How would you measure the change you're describing?" Additionally, teachers identified how the changes to instructional practice would increase student achievement. Finally, questions such as "What teaching strategy could you use to hit your goal?" and, "What are your next steps?" identify the work that needs to be done.

This model of instructional coaching focuses on developing a dialogical coaching relationship. In a dialogical coaching relationship, teachers and coaches work together as partners, using their shared knowledge and expertise to set and meet a student-centered goal (Knight, 2018). I was able to have a dialogical coaching relationship with Ms. Jones. She and I shared ideas very often and we both learned a lot in the process. The setback was often Ms. Jones' confidence. She sometimes focused on what did not go well in a lesson rather than celebrating her growth as an educator. During our meetings I tried to balance our conversations with steps toward improvement and celebrations of growth. In contrast, most likely because of the required use of coaching, my approach with Ms. Lark was more directive coaching. The mini-goals for her improvement were based on my observations and our conversation after I observed, and the goals were strongly guided by my observations rather than her perceptions.

Primary Teacher: After more reflective conversations, the self-selected goal Ms. Lark chose was: *90% of students will be continually engaged throughout lessons during the ELA block.* I knew she would need to set mini-goals since there were several basic strategies she needed to master before engagement was realized. Ms. Lark tended not notice her students' behaviors until their behaviors were out of control. Noticing undesired behaviors in the classroom was an early mini-goal for Ms. Lark. To support her in having an accurate picture of her students' behavior, I collected data during my observations during her ELA block on the number of students off task at a given time and how many students she praised and corrected during her lessons. We used the data to select something small she could improve. After I started collecting data, she was more cognizant of who she was correcting and who she was not noticing. This was an important step for Ms. Lark.

Intermediate Teacher: Ms. Jones and I next discussed methods she could use to reach her goal of increasing student engagement in her class during ELA. The strategies we felt would be most helpful for this goal were: 1) effective feedback/behavior specific praise, 2) opportunities to respond, 3) cooperative learning, and 4) shared learning targets. To encourage students to raise their hands and enter class discussion, Ms. Jones added a clear and visible class goal to her wall: "Respond to a question five or more times each day." Her goal was not correctness, but instead that students

were attempting to answer questions and participate in discussions. After adding this goal to her wall, Ms. Jones then looked at her lesson plans and added more opportunities to respond. She also noted success by praising students more often with feedback when they responded to questions and participated in class discussions.

Teachers Taking Action

After selecting a goal and a strategy to meet the goal, we moved into the second step of the Impact Cycle: learn. Teachers and coaches worked together to create a plan of action to implement the strategy chosen. The pace at which my coaching cycles moved was dependent on the teacher. Ms. Lark and I moved at a slower pace than Ms. Jones and I because the two teachers have different action plans and needs. Ms. Lark wanted to make changes in her instruction and classroom management but seemed nervous when presented with large changes. Ms. Jones was much more willing to take risks and try new things in her classroom.

Primary Teacher: Ms. Lark seemed to do best when given one or two small things to implement at a time, for example, some smaller goals were: 1) expecting perfect transitions every time by holding students accountable to the classroom behavior matrix and 2) adding morning meetings to her morning routine to establish and strengthen classroom community. After a few days of higher expectations for transitions and practicing transitions when not executed according to expectations, her students were doing much better. I predict that we may need to revisit the need for high expectations during transitions within the next few months. Morning meetings were going well, and she was starting to use that time as an opportunity to help students learn how to interact with each other appropriately at school and to build relationships with her students. The next mini-goal Ms. Lark attempted was to teach all students the silent attention signal called a “hushpuppy.” An ongoing goal was to give students positive feedback more often with the goal being four positives for each correction.

An ongoing concern about Ms. Lark was that her management strategy was very different when I was observing in the room versus when I was not in the room. While I was observing, Ms. Lark used many of the best practices we discussed during coaching meetings. However, as I walked past her classroom throughout the day, she tended to fall back to using ineffective management strategies such as raising her voice and using phrases such as, “excuse me,” which didn’t have meaning or consequences for primary students. I think when I was in the room, she felt like she had authoritative backup. We work together weekly and there is now a sense of camaraderie between us.

Intermediate Teacher: Ms. Jones has identified a goal of having her students more engaged and she selected annotating and collaborative learning as the two strategies to implement in ELA. I provided Ms. Jones with resources including videos of teachers using these specific ELA strategies, arranging for her to observe other teachers in the district and anchor chart ideas she could recreate. With both of these practices, Ms. Jones began by explaining her expectations, then modeling, and finally letting students try on their own while she circulated and provided feedback to students as they worked. Ms. Jones has successfully implemented both annotations and collaborative learning with her students, which has greatly enhanced student learning.

The next step for Ms. Jones was to write rubrics for annotating and answering questions in the workbook. We met to discuss how to write a strong rubric for the performance expectations. She wrote rubrics for annotating and answering questions. Her next step was to share the rubrics with her students and begin using them to grade her student’s work.

Reflections: I am currently engaging in dialogical coaching with Ms. Jones. My coaching with Ms. Lark is still directive. I am collaborating with other coaches as well as my own virtual coach to determine next steps to help Ms. Lark. Despite her hesitancy to be filmed, I feel this is a necessary next step and that she will begin noticing what is happening when she is teaching.

Coach's Reflections on the Impact Cycle with Teachers:

For a coaching experience to be most effective, I believe that teachers need to have a few characteristics like: 1) the basic skills needed to effectively manage a classroom; 2) be willing to try new things out of their comfort zones; and 3) have an open mind and a desire for change. For some teachers, these characteristics are inherent and for some teachers, these characteristics need to be developed. The type of coaching relationship I developed with these two teachers hinged on these characteristics.

As I continue to coach these two teachers, I plan to sustain my current practice of observing, providing feedback and encouraging best practices in their classrooms as outlined in the Impact Cycle (Knight, 2018). My goal moving forward is to individualize my coaching. Because Ms. Jones is willing to take risks and already has great teaching instincts, I can take a dialogical approach to coaching. Ms. Lark required a more directive approach to coaching. Individualized coaching based on my observations and the skill level of the teacher is the best utilization of coaching in my opinion. I will continue to make changes to my approach as I collect more field notes and observations. Coaching is an important practice, and one that I certainly hope my district chooses to continue in the future.

I have adjusted my approaches to coaching throughout this process. Before I started coaching, I didn't think personality would have as much weight in my approach to coaching; however, it does. The personalities of these two teachers has definitely impacted my coaching relationship with them. There were times when both teachers didn't understand something I said, and I had to rethink how I was presenting ideas. Taking a step back and viewing the entirety of our relationships has enabled me to understand these teachers more deeply. In the future, similar patterns will emerge; and I hope that my experience with these teachers serves as a guide for how to best meet the individual needs of our teachers.

Reference

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Author Biography

As USD 383 Instructional Coach with a Literacy Network of Kansas Striving Readers Grant, Cynthia serves four schools. Though she coaches teachers in all subjects, literacy has been her main focus during year one implementation of both instructional coaching and new ELA curriculum. Cynthia has worked as a primary and intermediate teacher in Utah and Washington and has also worked in ESOL and family empowerment positions. She is married to Travis and mother to Asher. The family has three dogs, Auzzie, Izzy, and Dog. She can be reached at cynthiac@usd383.org.