



# **Sabbatical Report**

To investigate Coaching as a development and improvement model, for an effective school.

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## Acknowledgements

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## Purpose of the Sabbatical

To further develop my own professional knowledge and leadership of coaching, through professional reading and by visiting a variety of primary schools to discuss their coaching programmes. This will enable St Mary's to build further on our culture of inquiry, with a focus on shared practice and to reflect on and critique practice, to determine the next learning steps for teachers.

A coaching culture is underpinned by critically reflective practice. This promotes and develops a foundation for new growth, where the aim is to support people to achieve more of their potential. 'Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximise their own performance' (Whitmore 2008)

The reflective nature of coaching programmes, 'Creates a culture of inquiry based on sharing practice, critical reflection and identifying next steps. This practice will increase teacher efficacy and result in improved teaching practice and outcomes for students.' (Bird 2013)

'Coaching takes an optimistic view of a person's ability to grow and develop, and liberates potential' (van Nieuwerburg 2012)

### What is coaching and why would we undertake it?

'Coaching is a reciprocal association where partners work together to set professional goals and achieve them' (Robertson 2008)

A coach should be viewed as a sounding board, a facilitator, a counsellor or an awareness raiser. The coach is not a problem solver, an advisor or instructor. Coaching can be viewed as an association of partnership. This association sees partners who are open to new learning, and who work together to develop each other's learning development journey through collaborative enquiry.

Collaborative enquiry has three core features at its base;

- a) a commitment to colleagues growth
- b) recognition that participation is expected
- c) recognition that colleagues are resources for one's own learning

Coaching also implies the concept of 'challenge'. This sees participants needing to be challenged to understand and reflect on how and why modifying their practice, will make a difference. Coaching provides this challenge. This is particularly so when teachers share their views with others in their wider professional learning community. Giroux (1992) has a term for reciprocal coaching, 'Border pedagogy', whereby coaching partners cross over their own professionally formed 'borders' and boundaries of knowledge, to view how others work.

Effective coaching has awareness and responsibility at its core. High awareness is vital for performance. This leads to determining what is relevant, by the gathering of facts and information. Responsibility is at the base of high performance. We are more committed to our performance, once we have accepted responsibility for our

thoughts and action. 'A successful coaching partnership gives both participants skills, attitudes and behaviours to become more reflective about their practice' (Robertson and Timperley 2007)

'One of the reasons that coaching is successful is that the coachee is often aware of the need for change, thus coaching can be viewed as an ideal model for self-improvement' (van Nieuwerburg 2012) It is a powerful intervention because it is a process that is always looking forward.

'Coaching is viewed as a powerful learning methodology as it enables the growth and development of a culture where authentic learning and leadership become the key drivers for participants' (Robertson 2008)

Coaching can be termed as a tool for 'effective potential growth influence.' It supports processes and practices for action research and development, which promotes long term constructive change. Coaching encourages classroom teachers to reflect more effectively on the ways in which they facilitate learning – it leads to the development of 'gravitas' (knowledge gained from deep reflection on practice) 'One of the reasons that coaching is successful is that the coachee is often aware of the need for change, thus coaching can be viewed as an ideal model for self-improvement' (van Nieuwerburg 2013)

Discussion forms the basis of coaching and the ongoing development and improvement of practice. The role of the coaching partner is to assist their partner to be reflective *in action*, *on action* and *for future action*, resulting in a knowledge *of practice* (Robertson and Timperley 2007)

An effective coaching programme will reflect the following core components;

- Each partner (coach) is viewed as a facilitator in the learning process
- It is the 'coached' partner's role to assume responsibility for their own learning, and for overseeing their 'session' i.e. developing goals and the agenda for each session
- Partners are aware of and have an understanding each other's role
- Time is given to the relationship so that it sustains and improvement occurs over time
- Strong communication and interpersonal skills support partners to work together in different ways
- Openness to flexibility and to support and promote the changing needs of each partner

The coaching relationship, based upon respect, honesty and trust, should be dynamic and continually evolving, to meet the needs of both parties. It is based on maximising experiential learning and allows opportunities for the affirmation and validation of practice. Teacher self-determination is enhanced, through a sense of agency and personal control, based on selecting one's own goals for growth and development.

A key role for Principals and Leadership Teams is to develop leadership in others, focused on encouraging them to take on responsibility for improving learning, and, achieving goals. Importantly, this is underpinned by a supportive community of

learners. Teachers gain greater agency in taking on ownership for their self-development and become proactive and confident in taking on the challenge to improve teaching practice.

Coaching can be viewed as self-directed learning as it 'is a form of study in which learners have primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences...and is the way most adults go about acquiring new ideas, skills, and attitudes' (Caffarella 1993)

Coaching must sit within a positive and encouraging community with strong relationships – as this environment is better able to support and assist behavioural change. The environment should allow teachers to be risk takers, and strive for creativity and innovation in their practice.

It is crucial for Principals to work to build and develop a learning community within schools, where participants think critically and in an ongoing fashion about matters as they are experienced and then adapt their practice as appropriate.

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An effective school learning community see Principals and leaders who will;

- be constantly searching for further effective ways to promote learning
- take action to reshape education
- be innovative and promote considered risk taking
- base their actions on a core set of beliefs and values based on social justice
- believe that they can make a positive difference
- insist that developing the learning opportunities of others is core business
- be critically reflective and work to continually develop this skill

Coaching also supports Principals in developing and understanding their own values and beliefs about how their staff learn best, and, how to assist this process.

'Education institutions that establish coaching relationships are more likely to form democratic communities of learners and therefore a special type of education culture that focuses on the continual improvement of learning'(Robertson 2008)

A powerful coaching programme encourages, promotes and is underpinned by the action research process, where practitioners identify a need, set an associated goal, and gather a variety of data from which an action plan is formulated. This is implemented and modified for further next steps, as needed, through continual review. Progress and findings may then be shared within the wider learning community, for further feedback and reflection.

This sees participants developing in a new role – that of becoming change agents within their learning institutions, further enhancing the learning community within

which they operate. 'When teachers develop authentic professional learning communities, powerful accountability arises from peer-to-peer interactions' (van Nieuwerburg 2013)

A pivotal skill in coaching programmes is for both partners to be able to engage in reflective interviews, asking in-depth questions to promote deep reflection on practice (the what and why, an action is being taken) and the effect of this, on their practice. Here, the role of the coach is to keep their partner focused and moving towards meeting their goal.

The selection of the right coaching partner is paramount and is based on respect, trust and importantly, confidentiality. Partners must be able to both discuss ideas, and listen effectively to their partner. Good coaches know how to coach and, be coached. Regularity of contact needs to be constant, if not, continuity is lost.

Effective coaches expertly utilize the following skills set;

a) *Listening*; listening first to learn

b) *Reflective interviewing*; asking questions that;

1. Clarify thinking about situations, actions
2. Clarify purpose, reasons and consequences
3. Promote thinking about the basis or outcomes of actions taken

c) *Goal setting and developing action plans*; looking ahead and planning the desired outcome (this enables a support framework to be developed)

d) *Setting suitable time frames*

e) *Self assessment*; ensuring that the responsibility for learning is based with the coachee/person being coached

f) *Observing and describing practice*; the ability to give a descriptive account of what was observed, without judgement

g) *Giving evaluative feedback*; giving advice, judgement or critique in relation to making progress towards goals.

An effective instructional coach supports teachers to incorporate research based instructional practices into teaching, that will enable students to learn more effectively. Where coaching sits within a positive and encouraging framework, the environment is better able to support and assist behaviour change

Successful implementation of a coaching culture for learning, within schools, leads to an improved environment for learning, leading to better outcomes for students. A coaching culture helps develop learning, understanding and personal responsibility. At the centre of a coaching culture is the drive to continuously improve. A coaching culture for learning, which is built on appreciative inquiry, will focus on and build on strengths.

Coaching is accepted as a positive intervention which will enable the organisation itself and the individuals within it to achieve better results. 'Self belief, self motivation, choice, clarity, commitment, awareness, responsibility and action, are the products of coaching.' (Whitmore 2008)

Coaching supports the principle of lifelong learning. It is seen as a valuable model for formative appraisal, as its core focus is based around the improvement of both learning experiences and opportunities over time.

'Coaching takes an optimistic view of a person's ability to grow and develop, and liberates potential' (van Nieuwerburg 2012)

The aim of coaching is to support people to achieve more of their potential. An effective coaching environment that reflects a supportive and ambitious learning community results in students thriving and encourages everyone to seek out more of their potential.

#### Executive Summary:

St Mary's has operated a successful research based coaching programme, for the past three years. It is reflective of the key elements as outlined in this paper and we know that its impact has been positive for both our staff and students. We have a learning community that exhibits positive attitudes towards improving its performance, where coaching goals are based around both personal and professional growth, and where our ultimate outcome is that learning opportunities for students are and continue to be, enhanced.

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