

Sabbatical Report –

Growing a Sustainable Coaching Culture at TPS

Cindy Walsh / Principal
Takapuna Primary School



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1. Purpose and Background

The purpose of my sabbatical was two-fold:-

- 1) To inquire into ways to enhance professional conversations in my school, through coaching, to improve teacher-performance and student-outcomes. A planned outcome of the inquiry was the development of a 'road map' to extend and deepen our coaching journey in our school, resulting in a sustainable coaching culture.
- 2) To grow my own coaching practice through professional reading, attendance of the Growth Coaching International conference in Melbourne and continued participation in Phase 4 of the Coaching Accreditation qualification.

Over my nine years of Principalship I have had the privilege of working with critical friends and appraisers from The Education Group who use a coaching approach in our scheduled meetings together. During these coaching sessions I experience challenging and impactful conversations. Conversations that make me carefully consider my everyday experiences and practice, scrutinise those, consider others' feedback and perspectives to develop new and better ways of thinking and doing things: learning on the job. When reflecting on other learning I have encountered over the years nothing has come close to the learning I do around my own leadership through coaching. "Coaching is about seeing leadership practice as opportunities for learning." (Robertson, 2016, p35).

Having experienced the benefits of coaching on my own professional growth as a leader I felt it imperative to extend these benefits to others in the school. The leadership team in 2013 (Principal, Deputy Principals and Team Leaders) therefore embarked on a journey of professional learning to develop our coaching with The Education Group and Growth Coaching International. Since then, the leadership team has been working on extending our coaching practise with further learning and new leaders have embarked on the

first stage of their journey. As a result of this, coaching practise and skills are being used actively in the school with a focus on supporting teacher inquiries (linked to appraisal) and at a more informal level, as an approach for helping staff and parents find solutions to challenges or direction for meeting goals.

The purpose of developing a 'road map' towards a coaching culture at TPS, based on my new learning and the knowledge of three other schools' journeys, their 'road blocks' and navigation around them, is to increase the likelihood of success in managing barriers that naturally arise when bringing about change in a school. As I found in my visits, no single journey will work in every school, schools are highly contextual and what works for one will not necessary work for another. My purpose is not to replicate the journeys of any one school but to adapt and design a journey that is unique to TPS, based on the learning from others who have forged the way.

2. *Rationale*

What is coaching and why coaching?

Van Nieuwerburgh (2014) states that *"there seems to be a broad agreement in the literature that coaching:*

- (a) is a managed conversation that takes place between two people;*
- (b) aims to support sustainable change to behaviours or ways of thinking;*
- (c) focuses on learning and development."* (van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p5).

Jan Robertson, in her 2016 book, 'Coaching Leadership' expands on the idea of "between two people" by suggesting that group-coaching and team-coaching are approaches that could arise when teachers teach or plan collaboratively, or when leaders or colleagues come together to have learning conversations. *"This type of practice helps build rich accountability for student outcomes – rich because all members of the school management and teaching team share the accountability as they coach one another in practice shifting conversations."* (Robertson, 2016, p107). She presents coaching as *"a special, sometimes reciprocal, relationship between (at least) two people who work together to set professional goals and achieve them. The term depicts a learning relationship where participants are open to new learning, engage together as professionals equally committed to facilitating one another's leadership learning, development and wellbeing (both cognitive and affective), and thereby gain a greater understanding of professionalism and the work of professionals."* (Robertson, 2016, p1 -2)

Of all the definitions of coaching that I have read, the ones that resonate most strongly with me are those that imply or directly refer to the concept of unlocking potential. This is a positive belief that each and every one of us has the answers within. With skilled conversations, such as coaching, these answers can be unleashed to maximise performance and that is what I believe as a coach is at the core of effective coaching partnerships and sits well with my belief in others and my inherent desire to help. (Whitmore, 1992)

It may be helpful at this point to clarify the differences between coaching and mentoring. Although both approaches share a similar skill-set and have aligned intentions, a mentor has a high level of expertise, knowledge and experience and imparts knowledge. A coach, on the other hand, does not necessarily have this expertise focusing instead on unleashing the knowledge and skills of their coachee as opposed to imparting knowledge.

So why coaching? Since starting on my personal coaching journey and highlighted by my sabbatical, I have found an abundance of compelling research and evidence to support the notion that coaching is a highly defensible foundation for school improvement.

Professor Helen Timperley carried out a review of research (Timperley, 2015) in relation to conversations that support professional growth. The review looked at professional conversations that achieved real changes in teaching practice, improved student outcomes, created better solutions to problems or developed new practice. She identified the following enablers for effective professional conversations, which have direct links to coaching practice, processes and skills:-

- Resources such as the tools and expertise that shape the quality and direction of conversations.
- Relationships of trust and mutual respect developed through conversations that challenge, based on the belief of an individual or group's capacity to make a difference.
- Processes that support clarity and shared understanding, are flexible and based on asking questions versus telling.
- A culture focused on improvement.

Jan Robertson (2016) suggests that coaching is the support we need in schools to develop future-focused schools. *".....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. These "coaching cultures" may thus be better suited for meeting the needs of students and leaders in this knowledge age, where flexibility, creativity, innovation and ability to adapt to change and take on new learning are essential skills."* (Robertson, 2016, p23)

In his book 'Quiet Leadership' David Rock (2006) presents a practical six-step guide to a new way of having conversations, based on recent discoveries about how the brain works. He encourages leaders to switch their energy from trying to do the thinking for people to focusing on improving thinking and helping people make their own connections. The case studies outlined in his book detail evidence of the transformative power of this approach on organisations around the world, based on coaching methodology.

"The new way, the way of a Quiet Leader, is to artfully build on people's strengths by improving their thinking. Doing this requires a basic understanding of the way our brain works, a deep respect for the brain's ability to solve any problem, and a certain graciousness and humility that is obvious in some of our more successful leaders." (Rock, 2006, p232)

3. Methodology

- Literature review
- Visits and interviews at three Auckland schools that have strong coaching cultures. Interviews with the Principal, lead teachers and students in each school
- Attendance of the 5th National Coaching in Education Conference – The Coaching Approach: Generating Learning – Melbourne 29th & 30th May 2017
- Continuation of phase 4 of Coaching Accreditation Programme – The Education Group and Growth Coaching International

4. Findings

School Visits

I visited three schools that were recommended as having strong coaching cultures – Kohia Terrace, Beach Haven Primary and Hobsonville Primary. I met with Principals, lead teachers and students.

Part A: I first asked key staff (Principal, lead teachers, Deputy Principals) to outline their journey from the start of coaching in each school to where they are today using the analogy of a road map. The purpose of this was to look at three different models of implementation and the reasoning behind the steps taken, so I would be more informed about possibilities when considering the next steps in our coaching journey at TPS.

Part B: I then asked follow-up questions to determine the impact of coaching on each school, to identify any road-blocks and keys to navigation and to highlight any other considerations that would support me in mapping out a future road-map for our school.

Key Questions

If you could start your journey again what would you change and why?

What road-blocks did you meet on the way and how did you navigate around these?

What impact has coaching had on the school?

What impact has coaching had on you personally?

How have you evaluated / reviewed the impact that coaching has had?

Anything else you would like to share?

Summary of findings

The Journey

- In all three schools, the coaching journey began with the Principals' personal experience of being coached by appraisers and critical friends igniting the motivation to extend coaching in the school based on the positive impact experienced.
- The next step in the coaching journey for all three schools involved the identification of key staff to train in coaching. This involved leadership team members (DPs, APs and Team Leaders) with existing responsibilities for teachers' professional growth. Training for School A and B involved the two day 'Coaching in Leadership' workshop with The Education Group in partnership with Growth Coaching New Zealand (GC NZ) and for School C, in-school training with The Education Group.
- Several months on from key staff training and coaching practise in their schools School A and B involved all staff in an Introduction to Coaching workshop run The Education Group. In School B this workshop continues to be delivered annually by school leaders.
- The three schools have a combination of self-selected and appointed coaches.

- Schools A and B use trios of coaching where the third person provides feedback to the coach on the process for further growth and development.
- In all three schools, coaching was further extended to involve the students. In Schools A and C this involved students coaching students. Both schools had taken part in a pilot programme with the Education Group (GC NZ) to create a primary school student coaching resource. School B implemented academic coaching where Year 6 students choose a staff member as a coach to support them with academic goals.

The Impact of Coaching

- All three principals spoke positively about the impact of coaching on their leadership and in their words, *spoke of coaching as being transformational and pivotal in their growth as leaders resulting in school improvement.*

This summary describes Principals' responses on the personal impact of coaching:-

- Less hesitancy around having difficult conversations.
- Deeper conversations with teachers that support professional growth and are solutions-focused.
- Supportive in unlocking the potential of leaders and teachers.
- Increased respect from staff.
- Development and strengthening of the dispositions of coaching i.e. developing trust, being present, listening actively, clarifying, empathising, being succinct, asking the best questions and giving feedback.

- When key staff were asked about the impact of coaching on their school there was a resounding emphasis in all three schools on the increase in teacher agency as a result of coaching. *"It has created a culture of teachers and staff owning their own journey. They feel things are done with them and not done to them."*

People interviewed felt that there had been a significant shift of responsibility for learning and professional growth from the leadership team to staff in their schools and said it increased autonomy and freedom. Two principals mentioned that coaching supported and strengthened the Teaching as Inquiry approach which are pivotal to school improvement, transformation and innovation.

This summary describes key staff responses on the benefit and impact of coaching on the school:-

- Coaching has helped strengthen relationships between staff, parents and students.
- It has empowered our leadership team with a language and structure to work with teachers, digging deeper into learning and difficult conversations.
- It has helped staff approach goal-setting and problem-solving in a positive way.
- It has been a successful organisational tool for some staff.
- As a result of coaching we have revamped and improved our appraisal system.
- Parents of student-coaches were invited in to observe their children coaching and were in awe of how their children conducted themselves. This created a powerful community connection.
- Our Community of Learners (COL) leaders all trained in coaching, viewing it as a critical part of growing capacity across schools.
- Coaching empowered our senior students to transition successfully to their new schools.

- In two schools visited, I had the privilege of interviewing students who had been trained in coaching and were actively coaching their peers. When asked about the impact of coaching on them

personally the two common themes that emerged across both schools were the building of strong relationships with their peers and the opportunity to work with students across the school, those they would not usually choose to work with.

"I have used my coaching to support the juniors when they had problems in the playground. Before coaching I would have left someone else to deal with it."

Secondly, the strengthening of their personal, social, emotional and life-long learning skills.

This summary describes student responses on the impact of coaching on them personally and on the school:-

- The students named the following skills and attributes that were developed and/or strengthened by being introduced to coaching: perseverance, independence, confidentiality, confidence, self-belief, positive interaction with peers, bonding with peers.
- Coaching helped coachees achieve their goals. *"I saw a difference with my coachee. At the beginning he was fidgety and didn't have good focus. After coaching him on this he was able to focus better in class and the teachers noticed this difference as well."*
- Learning how to coach has increased confidence and self-awareness. *"I have learnt to be true to myself." "I was shy before the programme, I now interact with more people."*
- Coaching was used at home with family.
- In-depth training and support tools like flip cards were essential to the effectiveness of coaching.

The Road Blocks and Navigation around these

- For all three schools sustainability was identified as the main challenge towards implementing a culture of coaching. To ensure that coaching was sustained in the ebb and flow of staff, the schools had built-in systems so that training in coaching was a continuous process. These included:-
 - Initial training of staff recognised as the key drivers or influencers in the school, including the Principal, leadership team members, lead teachers in coaching and senior students.
 - Ongoing schedule of training key staff to strengthen coaching practice.
 - Annual full staff training in coaching at Teacher Only Days led by outside or internal facilitators
 - Access of formal training through The Education Group (GC NZ).
 - Funding allocated for ongoing training.
 - Board of Trustees involvement including invitations for them to access training.
 - Overall commitment to keeping everyone upskilled.
 - Coaching skills included in "desirables" when advertising for staff.
 - Expectation that student coachees eventually become coaches.
- Another challenge identified by one school was a competing professional learning focus. In this particular school facilitative questioning had been recently implemented when the principal initially attempted to introduce coaching to the staff and this was met with resistance. To navigate around this the Principal turned the focus onto training key people in coaching so that eventually the coaching trios that were set up, and using facilitative questioning around personal goals, also had an effective coach per trio. Thus, the two approaches were amalgamated to deepen learning conversations.
- The students interviewed identified the main challenge as being the learning and adoption of the coaching process. *"When we were training to be coaches it was difficult. The coaching was not automatic to start with. You had to take notes while listening deeply and then talking back to them. It was hard. After a while you memorise it."*

All three schools had strong systems in place to support the students with their new learning. These included:-

- A formal approach to the student training and commitment to time required for learning complex skills. All three schools had key staff who had participated in The Education Group Peer Coaching workshop and were using the Peer Coaching programme. Two of the schools had participated in the pilot programme for primary schools in 2016.
- Key staff appointed to implement the programme and in all schools two key staff were involved so sustainability was ensured.
- After the intensive initial training (6 – 8 full days) there was a commitment to regular ongoing training and support for the students and close monitoring of the coaching taking place.
- Parental permission was required and parents and caregivers were involved throughout the process. This included being coached by their children and taking part in celebration days where they observed their children coaching others.

Evaluating the impact of coaching

- All three schools have systems in place to evaluate coaching at an individual level and at an organisational level.

These included:-

- Evaluation through the Principal's appraisal where specific questions are asked about the impact of the Principal's coaching of staff.
- Feedback from student coaches on impact of coaching on them personally.
- Personal feedback on coaching skills through coaching trios and coaching training.
- Observed evidence of coaching taking place in staffroom, classroom, and playground.
- Measured improvement of student outcomes through teacher inquiries using coaching and student voice gathered through the teaching as inquiry process.
- Annual reflection form for all staff including self-review of coaching skills, impact of coaching on professional growth and outcomes for learners. The responses are analysed and next steps developed.

5. Recommendations

My conviction and commitment to coaching has been further strengthened by the opportunities experienced during my sabbatical: it is an enabler of school improvement and transformation, with staff and student success and wellbeing at the heart. Through my own personal journey of developing and applying coaching practise, skills and a coaching way of being, through the literature review and the case studies I have outlined in this report, I have seen and experienced substantial evidence of the positive impact of coaching. I have no doubt that the journey towards adopting a coaching culture at our school is the right one. So where to next on our journey at TPS?

The following recommendations will be presented to the board, leaders and staff as a basis for discussion and subsequent decision-making to support our future journey towards adopting a coaching culture at TPS.

Recommendation 1:

An important and critical next step in our coaching journey will involve all teaching staff participating in an Introduction to Coaching workshop with an invitation to Board members. Regardless of whether all staff become coaches, it was recognised by leaders in the three schools that I visited that all staff who were experiencing coaching should have an understanding of the process. Jan Robertson (2016) states *“Both the person doing the coaching and the person being coached must be taught the skills of coaching and should discuss the principles behind these. When two people in a coaching relationship both know how to coach, coaching is easier, yet schools often want to develop only those individuals they select to be coaches. It’s therefore important that the coaches of each partnership not only empower the coached to make their own decisions about their leadership practice but also are overt about the coaching skills in action.”* (Robertson, 2016, p8)

Recommendation 2:

Further development of coaching expertise through formal training for existing leaders to strengthen coaching practice and build capacity for in-school training and sustainability

- Principal complete Coaching Accreditation phase 4 and then Solutions Focused Masters class
- DPs and Team Leaders complete Coaching Accreditation phases 1 – 3

“Educational leaders who have established and are carrying out the coaching process for their own professional development have validity. As a consequence, their expressed and modelled belief that coaching promotes educational leaders’ professional development is seen to be sincere.” (Robertson, 2016, p179)

Recommendation 3:

Identify other ‘champions’ or other key staff or influencers in the school to extend coaching training beyond the learning from the Introduction to Coaching workshop (recommendation 1). This could include future Learning Leaders in the collaborative spaces, Assessment for Learning Leaders, or those who develop a passion or specific interest in coaching. Consideration could be given to establishing Coaching Lead Teachers to drive and sustain coaching practice.

Recommendation 2 and 3 also acknowledge the importance of ongoing coaching-skills development as a necessary investment in the process.

Recommendation 4:

Extend coaching to involve students coaching each other by identifying key staff passionate enough to drive this and embark on the formal training to set the students up powerfully ensuring sustainability. For me, the pinnacle of the coaching journey would be to set up student coaching in our school as I see it as a powerful tool for realising our vision and goals of student agency and life-long learning.

Recommendation 5:

Set up systems to formally evaluate, monitor and reflect on coaching at a school-wide and individual level. At an individual level, reflective activities as described by Jan Robertson (2016) could be incorporated into the coaching partners’ schedule on a regular basis. Coaches would be encouraged to keep reflective journals to support their development as coaches perhaps as an aspect of their teaching inquiries or through their professional portfolios. Consideration would be given to the development of facilitators of coaching or expert coaches to support coaching partners – coaching others to use coaching skills. *“If partners are to sustain a coaching relationship long term, they need to continually monitor and evaluate their work together.”* (Robertson, p170, 2016).

Recommendation 6:

Further extend coaching practice as a way of being, instead of a compulsory one-off session twice a term linked to teacher appraisal. Amalgamate coaching practice with collaborative leadership and team inquiries, use coaching practise and associated language in PLCs, leadership team meetings, professional learning meetings and with students. Model coaching practise at every opportunity. Also consider building opportunities for self-selected coaches amongst staff. This could be a formal arrangement with time dedicated to the coaching or more informal where staff are encouraged to meet with a coach of their choice at a time of their choice or when a need arises.

Recommendation 7:

Advocate for the consideration of coaching as an enabler of improvement and transformative change across schools in our COL. Jan Robertson's concept of coaching partnerships consisting of colleagues in different schools (specifically Principals) and the compelling evidence of the positive effect on building a learning community with improved outcomes for learners should be considered as a way of working together across the schools in our COL.

6. References

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