

'Can the effective coaching of school leaders lift and accelerate student achievement?'

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Acknowledgements

A sabbatical is a great opportunity for reflection, learning and refreshment. After 18 years as a principal, in New Zealand and Ethiopia, I appreciated stepping away from my role for a term.

- Thank you to the Ministry of Education and NZEI for providing principal sabbaticals.
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- I am very grateful to all the staff at Kaiapoi Borough School (KBS) who stepped up in different ways to accommodate my absence.
- In particular I want to thank and acknowledge Chris Heenan for the great job she did as Acting Principal while I was away. Thank you!
- It was a pleasure and a privilege to visit: Bingham Academy and Reach International Centre of Education in Ethiopia, along with Amesbury School in Wellington. Thank you Kent, Ezra, Andy and Lesley, leaders in these schools, for accomodating my visits. You made me very welcome and were great at answering all my questions.

Executive summary:

Reading, thinking, conversations and school visits confirmed for me that the effective coaching of school leaders can lift and accelerate student achievement.

Purpose

My goal was to pursue conversations, readings, visits to schools and some coaching training in order to investigate further if the effective leadership coaching of school leaders can lift and accelerate student achievement. *NB: I regard student achievement as much more than solely academic progress. To me it includes social, emotional and behavioural progress too.*

Rationale and Background

I have always had an interest in the role of coaching in school settings. After more than 30 years in a wide variety of school contexts, this interest continues to grow.

On arrival at KBS in 2014 it quickly became apparent there was considerable work to do in lifting and accelerating student achievement. ERO arrived a few weeks after I did for their standard 3 year visit and promptly put KBS on a 1 – 2 year review cycle; given their significant concerns with what was happening in our school for our students. Five years and four ERO visits later, we are once again on track with the usual 3year review cycle.

The question I asked myself early on at KBS was: 'How can I work effectively with senior leaders, coaching and encouraging them in their roles so they and their teams also have an impact on lifting students achievement? This has driven much of my thinking and practice over the last five years, drawing on previous leadership experience and learning.

The sabbatical was an ideal time to reflect on our progress, consider the links between effective coaching and student progress and learn more about coaching practices.

Methodology

The sabbatical provided opportunities to:

- Read more about coaching
- Visit three schools (two in Ethiopia, one in Wellington) to discuss coaching practices
- Have key conversations with a range of leaders about their experience and use of coaching in their workplace – within and beyond education
- Plan for some future coaching training (*unfortunately the courses I wanted to do did not match with the sabbatical period so they will be undertaken in 2019*)

Findings

1. My reading started with 'Successful Educational Leadership' edited by Ross Notman (2011). In addition to looking for examples of coaching practice in a New Zealand setting I wanted to explore what constituted successful educational leadership in New Zealand and see where coaching might fit within that. A reinforcement gained from this book was the absolute importance of great relationships within schools. There are a number of examples in the book where values and the ethic of care are highlighted. In order for coaching to be effective I believe these characteristics, along with a strong culture of trust, need to be embedded. The case studies in this book are very interesting and very readable. The following quotes highlighted for me the link between successful leadership and potential links to effective coaching:

“Relational leadership is based on the belief that the effectiveness of a principal is contingent upon creating positive organisational relationships that lead to the development of successful learning communities.” D. Latham, page 51.

“The claim that leadership makes a difference to student achievement and wellbeing was confirmed through our study and it’s review of associated literature.” S.Lovett, page 22.

“Mike Sutton’s case study acknowledges the vulnerability of distributing leadership among staff, whereby delegated tasks may not be carried out effectively leading to project failure. This implies a need for leaders to distribute tasks in conjunction with clear goals and expected outcomes, and with appropriate support mechanisms in place.” R. Notman, page 140.

From here I read ‘Community the structure of belonging’ by Peter Block (2009) to look at leadership as ‘convening’ where leaders are responsible for doing something new and creating experiences for others. There are some fascinating ideas in this book in regards to what constitutes and enables community to grow. Block has a chapter with the title “Questions are more transforming than answers” and in it he states: “Transformation and restoration occur through the power of language, and how we speak and listen to each other.” page 101. Block goes on to say, in the same chapter: “Questions are more transformative than answers and are the essential tools of engagement” page 103. This is followed up with: “Achieving accountability and commitment entails the use of questions through which, in the act of answering them, we become co-creators of the world.” page 105. Plenty to think about!

So what does this mean for coaching? Effective leadership coaching is generally pursued through a structured conversation where questions are asked, responses noted, next steps discussed and then all of this revisited again. As part of my background reading on coaching I looked again at an older text ‘The Coaching at Work Toolkit a complete guide to techniques and practices’ (Zeus and Skiffington 2003). This was a text I used when working in Ethiopia, leading a large staff with teachers working from pre-school through to the end of high school, delivering the Cambridge International Curriculum. The book reminded me that while some elements of coaching may be the same, context and needs define the more specific path to follow. This has been particularly relevant at KBS given our journey in recent years. In their text, Zeus and Skiffington comment on coaching as follows: “Coaching encompasses numerous and varying models. Many coaches adopt an eclectic approach to the models and frameworks that underpin their practice. Coaching demands flexibility and not all models are appropriate for all coaching interventions.” page 19.

In July 2014 at KBS I had drafted the following coaching overview:

KBS Coaching Model

Goal: ‘To develop leadership capacity and enhance opportunities for staff, students, and whanau, at Kaiapoi Borough School.’

Background:

The value of coaching discussions, focusing on leadership development and growth, is considerable. These discussions are an excellent way of regularly revisiting job descriptions; along with checking the clarity and understanding individuals have about the expectations of their role. By providing a regular, semi-formal forum for discussion, the coach has an opportunity to provide support, encouragement and accountability. At the same time the discussion can be used to facilitate deeper questions about practice, the thinking behind it and address areas that need development.

Key components:

Relationship

- *Trust*
- *Confidentiality*
- *Encouragement*
- *Support*

Structure

- *Start with the individual – how are they?*
- *Revisit topics and discussion from the previous meeting providing accountability for actions agreed on since the last meeting*
- *Discuss current topics of interest – may be based around job description, reading, areas of interest, a skill or skills being developed, how individuals within a team are and how effectively are they are working together?*
- *At all times the underlying focus should be on our staff, students and their families, what is being done, initiated and, provided that makes a difference in learning*

Meetings

- *Must be regular - every fortnight for team leaders*
- *30 minutes*
- *Uninterrupted*
- *Individualised*

Notes

- *Must be written up*
- *Passed on to the individual and principal within 2 days*
- *Basis for next discussion identified at the meeting and date/time confirmed for the next catch up*

Over time what developed from this initial model was greater flexibility, more focused conversations centred on the Teaching and Learning part of our Strategic and Annual Plan. Also there grew to be greater specificity in looking at how effective coaching conversations might be used to have an impact on student achievement. The coaching model we use has, and I'm sure will, continue to evolve. The focus we have on student progress and achievement has I believe led to a lift in the way our students progressing.

I have also been reading some of what Paul Browning has written on leadership, in particular 'Creating the conditions for transformational change' (see reference list) and within it his 'Rubric for assessing trust and transformational leadership practice'. I believe this could make a great tool for self and peer assessment with senior staff as part of a coaching framework and we will be using this next year at KBS. I would highly

recommend anyone who is interested in developing staff having a look at this.

2. The opportunity to visit schools and have conversations with school leaders and friends working in leadership positions overseas was a valuable part of my sabbatical. The structure for these conversations was based around the following questions:

- *Do you use coaching in your workplace?*
- *If yes, what does this look like? Tell me about it's purpose and if you have a model you use or follow?*
- *What do you believe makes coaching effective? How do you know?*
- *What is the impact of this coaching on the staff members and those they work with (students or other adults)*

Interestingly, with all my conversations, everyone could see the value having a coaching framework in their workplace. They all saw this as an important way of developing staff and improving outcomes for students and/or their organisation. Of the three schools I visited, two were working towards a coaching framework and we had interesting conversations on how they could be developed further given context and needs.

Lesley Murrphy at Amesbury School had been recommended by Jan Robertson as someone to visit to see what was in place in terms of the coaching of staff and what a great visit it was! Lesley was very generous with her time and sharing the resources she has developed with her team for coaching.

For schools it seems the link from effectively coaching staff to seeing a lift in student outcomes can be elusive to establish. It was clear however that working with senior staff to develop their professional capacity and intentionally focussing on lifting student achievement can lift the progress students make.

From the conversations I had with others in leadership positions, outside of education, they confirmed the opportunity to be coached in their leadership roles would be great. Interestingly none of them had formal structures to enable a coaching framework in place. This made me wonder if perhaps the education sector is better placed for coaching frameworks to be developed?

Implications and Conclusions:

As principals we must ensure the progress of students and development of staff. From what I have learned and trialled a coaching framework is an effective tool for developing staff and can in turn help to lift student achievement. What we started with in 2014 looks quite different to what and how we do things now. Through key questions, regularly recorded conversations, clear expectations and follow up, change and then student progress can be accelerated. This appears to be reinforced through the reading I have done and the visits and conversations I had.

The coaching model we have trialled at KBS involves regular meetings with key staff; these are led by myself, or one of our Deputy Principals. The meetings have evolved to include more specific questions (e.g. about

progress with Teaching as Inquiry) to focus on what is happening within teams, classes and for individuals.

One of our Deputy Principals also initiated regular Student Achievement meetings with senior staff to examine how students are progressing, how their progress can be ensured and what to do when progress is not being made. These regular conversations (using a coaching approach) have become part of how we do things and have plenty of scope to develop further. Future changes will likely include: building greater knowledge of effective coaching and making stronger links between conversations staff have and their follow up with student achievement.

So what are the next steps from here?

- Continue with the development of a coaching culture at KBS, working intentionally with staff to develop their knowledge, skill and implementation of effective coaching practice with the ultimate goal of lifting student achievement
- We will continue to focus our senior staff meetings on the needs of students aiming to lift engagement and achievement
- We will be trialling the 'Rubric for assessing trust and transformational leadership practice' within our coaching framework
- In 2019 I will take part in two courses run through 'Growth Coaching New Zealand':
 - 1) 'Introduction to Leadership Coaching'
 - 2) 'Coaching Accreditation Programme'

References:

1. Notman, R. (2011) *Successful Educational Leadership in New Zealand Case studies of schools and an early childhood centre*. Wellington, New Zealand: NCER Press.
2. Block, P. (2009) *Community the structure of belonging'* California, United States of America: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.
3. Zeus, P and Skiffington, S (2003) *The Coaching at Work Toolkit a complete guide to techniques and practices*. Roseville, Australia: McGraw-Hill.
4. Paul Browning: <https://mrnickmartin.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/trust-and-transformational-leadership.pdf>
5. <http://educationgroup.co.nz/> for information on coaching courses