International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education

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Received 7 September 2015
Revised 27 November 2015
13 January 2016
7 February 2016
2 March 2016
5 March 2016
Accepted 5 March 2016

Coaching for professional growth in one Australian school: "oil in water"

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to build knowledge around the use of coaching to develop teachers' professional practice in schools. It surfaces insider perspectives of teachers and school leaders in one Australian school, during the development of a model for teacher growth, which used a combination of cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching.

Design/methodology/approach – A narrative approach to interview data were used to examine the perspectives of 14 educators – teachers and school leaders – involved in the implementation of a school-based cognitive coaching model.

Findings – This study found that being a coach is an empowering and identity-shaping experience, that coaching for empowerment and capacity building benefits from a non-hierarchical relationship, and that coaching can be enhanced by the use of additional tools and approaches. Implementing a school-based cognitive coaching model, in conjunction with the Danielson Framework for Teaching, can have unexpected impacts on individuals, relationships, and organizations. As described by a participant, these butterfly effects can be non-linear, like "oil in water."

Originality/value – In examining teacher and school leader perceptions of a coaching model that trusts teachers' capacity to grow, this paper shows what coaching and being coached can look like in context and in action. It reveals that cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching can be congruent tools for positive teacher and organizational growth, requiring a slow bottom-up approach to change, an organizational culture of trust, and coaching relationships free from judgment or power inequity. It additionally shows that the combination of being a coach, and also being coached, can facilitate empowerment, professional growth, and changes in belief and practice.

Keywords Coaching, Teacher quality, Educational leadership, Continuing professional development, Cognitive coaching, Mentoring and coaching in educational contexts, Quality in education, Teacher professional learning community, Teachers' CPD provision

Paper type Research paper

A global focus on developing teacher quality, in order to improve student learning, has resulted in the promotion of different means of seeking to bring about effective and sustained teacher learning (Baguley and Kerby, 2012; Desimone *et al.*, 2002). Negative, competitive, or punitive drivers of teacher improvement that result in fear and compliance (Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Hattie, 2015b) can be damaging to educators' identities (Baguley and Kerby, 2012), and encourage performance teaching (Wiliam, 2014). As intensive, ongoing professional learning, rather than one-off or short-term experiences, is more likely to have an impact and prepare teachers for the complex demands of quality teaching (Desimone *et al.*, 2002), coaching teachers as a means of improving practice has emerged in recent years as a school model for continuous professional improvement. School-based coaching models have a place in those interventions that focus on growth, collaboration, and empowerment as ways into developing educators' practices and the professional learning cultures of schools (as recommended by Hattie, 2015a, b). Although increasingly accepted as a way to develop educators, coaching is under-researched, perhaps in part because coaches do not research their own practice (Fletcher, 2012).

International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education
Vol. 5 No. 2, 2016
pp. 66-86

2046-6854
DOI 10.1108/IJMCE-09-2015-0025

In their seminal work on coaching, Joyce and Showers (1988) contend that coaching in education fosters collaborative teaching communities, cultivates shared language and understandings, advances clearer cognition of teaching purpose and practice, and builds school norms that support continuous teacher improvement and effective organizational growth. Recent literature confirms that coaching benefits the coachee in developing their self-efficacy (Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013), as well as practice, agency, and leadership capacity. It provokes thinking and provides space for reflection (Charteris and Smardon, 2014). Coaching improves teaching and teachers' experiences of professional learning (Lofthouse *et al.*, 2010).

This paper builds knowledge around the practice of coaching in schools, as a tool for teacher and organizational growth, by examining teacher, middle leader, and executive leader perspectives around a cognitive coaching model in one Australian school. Two teachers together with the researcher – who were school-based cognitive coaches and coachees – provided an insider perspective on the practice of coaching from the perspective of coach and coachee, while 11 school leaders provided a strategic leadership viewpoint about the perceptions and impacts of coaching within the context of the school's coaching intervention. The present study asked the question: what might insider perceptions of a school-based coaching model offer to understandings about coaching in schools?

The present study provides insights into the application and effect of two tools for coaching of teachers for growth, revealing them to be effective choices for a growth-focussed professional learning model: cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching[1] (Netolicky, 2016).

Coaching for professional growth: review of the literature

Definitions and models of coaching are diverse and contested. In an educational context, the term "coaching" describes a variety of ways in which individuals are paired with a coach for a variety of purposes. Some researchers have grouped coaching into areas, such as peer coaching, cognitive coaching, technical coaching, literacy coaching, team coaching, collegial coaching, and instructional coaching (Cornett and Knight, 2008; Showers and Joyce, 1996). Others see two main arenas of coaching: expert coaching and peer coaching (Lu, 2010). Expert coaching involves an expert/protégé relationship in which someone with more advanced expertise provides assistance to someone of less experience (Murray *et al.*, 2009). In peer coaching, teachers are paired with coaches who have similar levels of knowledge and experience; the coaching relationship may be reciprocal.

One form of expert coaching is instructional coaching (Cornett and Knight, 2008), involving specific coach feedback, judgments, and suggestions. Cornett and Knight conducted an experimental study of 51 teachers on the effects of instructional coaching as a means of professional learning for teachers. They concluded that coaching by an expert increases the frequency and quality of teachers adopting new teaching practices, when compared with teachers who do not receive coaching support. However, Fletcher (2012) notes that there is not yet any external validation of instructional coaching. Some suggest that coaches should not evaluate or advise on coachees' work; coaching should remain separate from evaluation (Showers and Joyce, 1996).

Peer coaching, a non-evaluative, non-hierarchical form of coaching (Zepeda *et al.*, 2013), appeared in education literature from 1980 onwards (Lu, 2010), with the purpose of implementing innovations that effect positive change for students (Joyce and Showers, 1988). This reflects the central aim of most coaching of teachers: improving

student learning by developing teachers' practice. Allowing teachers to observe and learn from each other is claimed to stimulate knowledge sharing and feedback giving, shape language of quality instruction, and develop a positive learning culture among teachers (Barber and Mourshed, 2007).

Peer coaching has been found to have both positive effects and gaps. Instructional rounds (City *et al.*, 2009; Marzano, 2007) is a form of peer coaching in which a small network of teachers work collectively through a sustained inquiry process to enhance their teaching practice, based on classroom observation data. Marzano (2007) argues that these observations are non-evaluative, yet he also suggests that observers take notes on the positives and questions for each observed lesson, which some might argue is a form of evaluation. Wong and Nicotera's (2003) synthesis of literature found that peer coaching can promote a culture of collaboration and professionalism, while expanding teachers' working repertoires of planning and instructional strategies. Zepeda *et al.* (2013) found that peer coaching can be thwarted by scheduling difficulties, time constraints, weak peer partners, and the peer coach's lack of skills to provide effective feedback. These findings indicate a need for schools and systems to consider the logistical challenges of peer coaching and the rigor of training received by those who coach. Goker's (2006) study found peer coaching to promote confidence, autonomy, and self-directed learning in the coachee. However, his work also revealed a concern of peer coaching: teachers' varied capacities for self-reflection and self-directed development. Goker's participants lacked a language of reflection, showed inability to be self-critical, and found difficulty identifying strategies for improving practice. These findings point to potential criticism of peer coaching: it does not provide external expertise that might widen teacher coachees' classroom repertoires.

One possibility for addressing teachers' lack of a language of reflection and ability to hone in on areas for improvement, is to apply a "map" of teaching with a clear set of agreed standards, a way to think systematically about the complexity of teaching, and a framework for understanding both the big picture and the interrelationships of individual aspects (Hammerness *et al.*, 2005). Not only do teachers have to want to improve, they must know how to improve and on what aspects they would benefit from focussing their attention (Levin, 2009). Through this lens, mapping teaching is less about identifying or measuring quality and more about changing or developing teacher quality; that is, building a common understanding of the complexity of teaching in order to improve it.

As well as various national professional standards, frameworks that map the complex interrelated elements of teaching have emerged, such as Marzano's Causal Teacher Evaluation Model (Marzano, 2007) and the Danielson Group's Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2008, 2013). These provide teachers with a language for reflection on practice, an element missing from Goker's study. The Danielson Framework for Teaching, which was used in the coaching model of the present study, has been shown to: be a tool for identifying those teachers who have the most impact on student achievement (high-observation ratings on the framework correlate with high student achievement gains), focus observers' attention on specific aspects of teaching practice, establish common evidentiary standards for each level of practice, and create a common vocabulary for pursuing a shared vision of effective instruction (Kane and Staiger, 2012; Sartain *et al.*, 2011). Marzano's model has also been tested in studies and meta-analyses (Marzano *et al.*, 2012), which report that using the instructional strategies of the model improves student achievement and helps teachers develop themselves professionally.

Cognitive coaching (Costa and Garmston, 2006), the model of coaching examined in the present study, focusses on developing individuals as self-directed, self-modifying learners. It is a data-based, non-judgmental, developmental, and reflective model that facilitates planning, reflecting, and problem resolving, as well as a tool for developing professional communities that value interdependence and individual capacity for self-directed learning. As non-judgmental mediator of cognition, the cognitive coach focusses on the use of a toolbox of coaching processes, including paraphrasing and questioning, which extend a coachee's thinking. Any judgments, positive or negative, are discouraged. Much like the coaching described by Celoria and Hemphill (2014), it is process – rather than content or pedagogy oriented.

Cognitive coaching has been found to be an effective change agent for teachers, improving teachers' classroom practice, shifting perceptions of teaching and learning, and increasing feelings of efficacy and job satisfaction (Batt, 2010; Edwards and Newton, 1995). The model draws from research that shows that neurochemical pathways in the brain work in such a way that if an individual does not feel safe, they cannot think and learn (Costa and Garmston, 2003). For learning to occur, there may be what Costa and Garmston call "disequilibrium," or what Lofthouse *et al.* (2010) call "rethinking" or "dissonance," but a foundation of safety and trust needs to be established in the coaching relationship and process, so that thinking and reflection can occur in the brain. This reflects subsequent work that has looked at neural responses. Coaching that emphasizes compassion has been shown to positively enhance openness to learning and incite behavioral change, while deficiency-based coaching for compliance results in defensiveness and reduced cognitive functioning (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2013; Jack *et al.*, 2013). As behavior and cognition are inseparable from emotion (Day and Sachs, 2004), schools intending to use coaching to maximize professional growth should consider how trust, rapport, and relationships can be fostered at individual and organizational levels.

Like much school reform, coaching initiatives should include adequate training, sufficient time, appropriate resources, and a process to review their effectiveness (Lofthouse and Hall, 2014; Wong and Nicotera, 2003). As individual and organizational trust is a foundation stone of effective school relationships (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), consideration of school context is key, as coaching dynamics cannot be separated from the wider contextual culture. Trust needs to be fostered, participants encouraged to recognize the need for improvement, and a pervasive culture of learning built (Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012). When school professionals trust each other, and feel trusted, they feel safe to be vulnerable, experimental, and engaged in reform initiatives (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). In line with the call for nurturing collaborative capacity through growth-focussed rather than accountability-driven approaches (Fullan, 2001; Hattie, 2015b), teachers need to trust coaches and feel trusted by their coach and school. A safe and non-evaluative environment, in which power inequities are minimized, is central to a culture of learning, experimenting, and refining teaching practice (Joyce and Showers, 1988). So, a successful coaching model requires trust to be fostered at three levels: in the coaching process, in the coaching relationship, and in the organization and its agenda. This also requires the organization to trust the coachees, their professionalism, and their capacities for self-reflection and development. A tension can arise in school coaching contexts when school leaders colonize and infiltrate the process for management agendas, rather than protecting it as a growth process (Lofthouse *et al.*, 2010; Lofthouse and Hall, 2014; Lofthouse and Leat, 2013).

Hargreaves and Skelton (2012) warn about "contrived collegiality" in which coaches force compliance rather than help teachers help themselves to build capacity.

They caution that coaching has often, within the context of large-scale systematic reform, become an externally prescribed process done to people for the purposes of compliance. In context and in practice, coaching, like other forms of professional learning, can have "a troubled identity, caught between empowerment and managerialism" (Lofthouse and Leat, 2013, p. 9), in which school leaders are perceived to be exercising control over teacher learning.

Many agree that coaching is a valuable form of professional learning that impacts positively on thinking and practice (Batt, 2010), but different coaching "camps" promote different models, such as instructional, peer, and cognitive. Some research focusses on the coach (e.g. Celoria and Hemphill, 2014; Polly *et al.*, 2015) and some focusses on the coachee (Batt, 2010; Goker, 2006), or on teachers trained in coaching (e.g. Edwards and Newton, 1995). Concerns remain about the school-based implementation of coaching, including that the purpose of coaching initiatives can be shifted toward surveillance and performance, rather than collaborative learning and individual growth (Hargreaves and Skelton, 2012; Lofthouse and Hall, 2014; Lofthouse and Leat, 2013). Questions remain. Which models of coaching are the most effective for improving teachers' practice? Who should coach teachers? How might the need for a shared, precise language of teaching practice be met? How can schools foster trust at individual, coaching relationship, and organizational levels?

In order to develop answers to some of the above questions, attention should be given to the lived experiences of coaching approaches in schools from the perspective of coaches and coachees. Research on coaching teachers for professional learning and improvement of practice would benefit from looking at coaching models in practice in schools, including how coaching is being used in conjunction with other tools such as professional standards or teaching frameworks. It is this niche that the present study explored. The combination of cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching, as implemented in one Australian school, provided a context for the illumination of the perspectives of teachers – who were both coaches and coachees – and school leaders.

Narrative inquiry: research design

Set within a social constructionist theoretical frame, with a focus on the phenomenon of school-based coaching of teachers, narrative inquiry was selected as method, data, and product, in order to provide in-depth insights into teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of cognitive coaching. A narrative approach privileges humanness and the plurality of "truths" (Riessman, 2002), harnessing remembrance and retelling as a way into understanding phenomena, and into uncovering significance in our remembered moments (Leggo and Sameshima, 2014). In this case, participants were asked to share their experiences of a school-based coaching intervention.

The research site for the present study was a specific environment with particular kinds of individuals. Lutwidge School (a pseudonymic name) is an Australian, non-selective, independent, well-resourced pre-kindergarten to year 12 school, with about 1,500 students from metropolitan, rural, and international backgrounds. The Teacher Growth Initiative, a teacher-directed growth-through-observation-and-coaching intervention, situated within the context of Lutwidge School, provided a backdrop for this study's participants and their stories of coaching and being coached. The Teacher Growth Initiative was a new intervention, which used a combination of cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching as a model of professional conversation and formalized reflection on practice. The initiative was not a

stand-alone reform but was introduced alongside already-existing work such as use of the Danielson Framework for Teaching in teacher-self-reflection documents, professional learning community teams, and the work of external pedagogical consultants with classroom teachers.

The Teacher Growth Initiative emerged out of the school's strategic intents and began with a research and proposal phase in 2012, followed by two pilot years in 2013 and 2014. The model being piloted by the teachers in the Teacher Growth Initiative team involved two cycles of: a pre-conference cognitive coaching conversation; two 20-minute lesson data collections; and a post-conference cognitive coaching conversation, using the Danielson Framework for Teaching as a frame to guide discussion of lesson data. The Danielson Framework for Teaching was used in the Teacher Growth Initiative to develop the breadth of teachers' reflection and a shared, precise language for talking about teaching practice. This particular framework was selected in part because its language was already embedded in the school's teacher appraisal processes. The decision for teachers to be coaches was a deliberate attempt to address issues of trust and expertise. That is, a small team of teachers trained in cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching, who were also themselves coached, was intended to ensure coaching expertise while fostering trust in coachees through non-hierarchical coaching relationships.

Participants were drawn from a pool of those involved in the Teacher Growth Initiative. They were: the researcher (also a teacher at the school, the facilitator of the initiative, and a participating coach and coachee), two teachers from the initiative, six middle leaders, and five executive leaders. All 11 Teacher Growth Initiative first pilot year team members were invited to participate in this study. Four of those teachers volunteered, although two later withdrew. All 20 academic leaders at Lutwidge School were invited to participate; five executive leaders and six middle leaders agreed.

Data were generated in individual, semi-structured narrative-eliciting interviews that posed sparing, open, story-inviting questions. Questions were designed to focus participant responses on their experiences of the Teacher Growth Initiative, including its cognitive coaching and Danielson Framework for Teaching elements. Interviews followed a cognitive coaching pattern of "pause, paraphrase, pause, pose question" in order to allow data to reflect the idiosyncrasies of participant stories. The researcher and teachers were interviewed twice by an independent interviewer in the first pilot year of the initiative (2013), while the leaders were interviewed once by the researcher in the second pilot year (2014).

Transcriptions of interviews, which provided the primary data of the study, were then coded for emerging themes, and for outlying perspectives. The study took a hermeneutic approach to narrative interpretation that involved iteratively, immersively studying data for what was meaningful for participants and what themes emerged, using a combination of inductive and deductive interpretive procedures (Squire, 2008). The researcher conducted an ongoing circle of analysis, repeatedly re-visiting data, looking for converging patterns, and individual differences. For the purpose of this paper, the framework of analysis was the lens of lived experiences of, and perceptions around, the Teacher Growth Initiative in the Lutwidge School context.

The researcher's insider role, especially that of member and leader of the Teacher Growth Initiative, meant that ethical risks to the teacher participants needed to be minimized. The teacher participants dealt only with a third party and were interviewed by an independent interviewer who had no connection with the research site or the

participants, was bound by a confidentiality agreement, and was briefed by the researcher on interview protocols. The researcher was interviewed first, before the teachers, in order to give the independent interviewer a better understanding of the research being undertaken. After teacher interviews were conducted, audio-recorded interview data were then transcribed, de-identified, and sent to participants for veracity checking and approval. Only de-identified, authenticated transcriptions were provided to the researcher. In these ways, risks to those teachers involved in, and those not involved in, the research, were minimized. However, that only four of 11 teachers volunteered to participate, and that two withdrew, reflects the possibility that participants involved in narrative research may feel vulnerable, exposed, or at risk of having themselves and their stories identified.

As the school leaders were not in a dependent relationship with the researcher, it was not necessary for interviews to be undertaken by an independent interviewer; the researcher interviewed the school leader participants. In order to address issues of dependency and minimize work relationship issues, the following was done: school leaders were informed (in letters and at the beginning of the interview) that they did not have to answer any question with which they feel uncomfortable, could withdraw from the interview or study at any time, and would be given the opportunity to check, amend, and approve interview transcripts. The researcher made clear her separate role of researcher, as distinct from her role in the school, and that all data collected would remain anonymous and confidential.

Insider perceptions of cognitive coaching: results

The results of the present study are outlined below, taking the form of summaries of narrative data in order to illustrate how each of the participant groups – researcher, teacher, and school leader – reflected upon their perceptions of their experiences of cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching within the Teacher Growth Initiative. In order to preserve participant anonymity and present the essence of the data, stories of participant groups with multiple participants (teachers and leaders) have been melded into composite summaries.

Researcher: coaching shapes identity, thought, talk, and action

> I always saw learning as constructivist, as constructed by the learner, but cognitive coaching gets you thinking that it doesn't do a staff member or a student any good for you to do the thinking for them. It has me thinking more about how I might ask questions to more deliberately help them come to their own understanding about things or be more independent learners, rather than giving them more direction. It's about stepping back, letting go of your own stuff, not taking the power away from the person to find their own solutions and have their own growth. I'm not a total buy-in to cognitive coaching because I find that if people are floundering it is important to give them some support, consultation, direction. It's affected how I speak to people whether it's my students, my colleagues, my friends, or my own kids. If you work with those kinds of talking, it becomes more a part of the way you talk and how you approach conversation whether in a classroom, a team or personal relationships. It hasn't changed who I am, but it has changed how I might respond (researcher).

The researcher's beliefs about coaching, learning, teaching, and herself were shaped by her experience of leading the Teacher Growth Initiative and participating in it as coach and coachee. The combination of training in cognitive coaching, being a coach, and being coached, led to shifts in beliefs and behaviors. The researcher reflected that

cognitive coaching training focusses on the processes, maps, and questions to ask, but grounds these details in larger philosophical and conceptual ideas: a constructivist view of learning and research about cognition, which suggests that people learn and grow when they do the thinking themselves, and that they have the capacity to be reflective deep thinkers. The philosophical and evidential foundation allowed her to see the reasons for this approach to conversation. This was helpful for the researcher in slowly chipping away at her initial "not a total buy-in" reservations about cognitive coaching, which stemmed from her own innate desire for positive reinforcement. It was then cognitive coaching conversations – as coach and coachee – that began to show her the transformative power of coaching. She found herself having "a-ha" moments in coaching conversations. Reflecting the findings of Boyatzis *et al.* (2013) and Jack *et al.* (2013) that positive coaching conversations can light up the brain for days afterwards, she found her thinking bubbling up in the days after a conversation, and having coaches coming back to her a week after a conversation and telling her how the conversation had sparked a series of subsequent changes, conversations, or actions.

She also realized the power of listening and paraphrasing. The coachee experience of being truly and absolutely listened to, without interruption or judgment, felt like a self-indulgent luxury rarely found in life's day-to-day conversations. As coachee, hearing her own words paraphrased back to her crystallized her thoughts. As coach she sometimes saw the coachee have their own lightbulb moments as they suddenly clarified, extended, or drew to the surface their thinking, feelings, goals, and solutions. As both coach and coachee, it was those moments of – "Yes! That is what I mean and I didn't have the words for it until now," or, "It seems so simple, but that is what I have to do here," or, "I never thought of it like that but suddenly it is crystal clear" – that were most powerful for the researcher. In one conversation in which she was coach, the coachee (who had been doing all the talking and all the thinking and all the problem solving) began saying, "Yes, you're absolutely right; that is the solution to my problem!" and yet she knew that it was them, and not her, who had come to their realization. Being in these cognitive coaching conversations allowed her to experience the power of restraint, listening, pausing, paraphrasing, and asking questions, which provoked or clarified thinking. It confirmed the results of other studies, which have shown coaching to build teachers' efficacy, autonomy, and self-directedness (e.g. Batt, 2010; Goker, 2006).

The complementary component of the Danielson Framework for Teaching, combined with having the space and time, when being coached, to "think aloud" about her practice, stretched the researcher's thinking. She had thought that, as a reflective practitioner, a conversation would not draw out extra reflection, but found that in cognitive coaching conversations, and in the interviews for this study, thinking aloud through talk did make her think on the spot in fresh ways. This was enhanced by the use of the Danielson Framework to pinpoint specific aspects of teaching practice for targeted reflection and discussion. As the Framework rubrics cover a wide range of aspects of teaching, it was impossible to gloss over those facets on which the researcher might not normally dwell, taking her beyond habitual patterns of tried and tested approaches.

The researcher felt the "aftershocks" of cognitive coaching training on her personal, professional, and classroom conversations, on her conceptualization of learning and teaching. She watched as relationships that began as coaching conversations developed into ongoing collaborative partnerships. The researcher noted that cognitive coaching training and practice impacted the way she perceived her roles, not only in the

Teacher Growth Initiative team, but also in other arenas, such as her classroom, teaching teams, research interviews, and personal relationships. She saw cognitive coaching as a way of being, noting that "it becomes more a part of the way you talk" and a part of the way she responds to others in various relationships and situations. The training incited her reconsideration of what was actually helpful for a coachee, and that this might not be giving advice or solving problems. Rather, coaching that empowered the coachee by building their internal capacity began to seem most helpful for individual and organization.

The combination of cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework, of being coach and coachee, was transformative for the researcher in terms of her beliefs and practices. Cognitive coaching training and experiences began to become part of the researcher; a way of being; an identity as coach. These affected how she thought about and conducted her conversations in school and life. Feeling discomfort in coaching conversations was reminiscent of Costa and Garmston's (2003) "disequilibrium" and Lofthouse *et al.*'s (2010) "dissonance." It showed her that when she is most inspired is not necessarily when she learns most; that feeling uncomfortable leads to growth. The researcher used the metaphor of a dandelion to explain her non-linear experience of change that resulted from being a coach and being coached; she was not sure in which direction each seed from her cognitive coaching learning was going to grow, or which garden it might influence.

Teachers: new beliefs about what is helpful for teachers

> I like the way that it really gets you to think about making the other person think for themselves, to actually step back and let that person work out issues or solutions or reflections for themselves […]. Your job as a coach is to get the best out of the other person – not to give them the answers or give them solutions. But to get them to do that for themselves […]. It's made it clear to me that there's less of a need for me to go in and be an expert and tell them, "You need to do this, you need to do that." Sort of […] guiding them along and helping them identify their own direction […]. I think they're going to be more willing to change when they're identifying the area for themselves, than me telling them what they need to do (teacher).

For teacher participants, who were the cognitive coaches and coachees as part of the Teacher Growth Initiative pilot, cognitive coaching was a professional learning experience that they approached in different ways. One teacher was skeptical at first, wondering if the cognitive coaching approach was being driven by an agenda of school management. The other was enthusiastic about being trained in cognitive coaching as it was something they had "been wanting to do." The skeptical teacher, in their second interview, described cognitive coaching as "a revelation" that "made me step back and really think," especially about what it was to be a coach or to be helpful to colleagues, coachees, or students: "Your job as a coach is to get the best out of the other person, not to give them the answers." That teacher said they could now "see its value […] at every level." The more initially enthusiastic teacher, at the end of the pilot year, continued to see cognitive coaching as "really important" for the growth of coachees, and for themselves as coach.

Training in cognitive coaching influenced both teachers' conversations in school and in wider arenas, while also inciting their own reflections about, and potential shifting of, their professional identities. Both teachers had rethought their teaching practice as a result of training in cognitive coaching, seeking to "empower" students more in the classroom and facilitate students' capacities for self-awareness and self-direction.

This shift in focus was based on the principles of cognitive coaching and the "distinguished" column of the Danielson Framework for Teaching. Both teachers talked about applying cognitive coaching questioning to arenas outside of coaching, including their classrooms, with colleagues, and in personal relationships. As they became more immersed in the coaching theory and practice, their thinking and behaviors shifted, becoming more deliberate and with more awareness. What was most revelatory was a sense of being "conscious" of many aspects of communication, with clear intent and protocols for professional conversation that facilitates the thinking and empowerment of others. Both teachers took their developing knowledge of the Danielson Framework into their classrooms, using their understandings of the "proficient" and "distinguished" descriptors to reflect on and shape their practice during lessons.

Both teacher participants emphasized the coachee-focussed aspect of cognitive coaching as key to their increasingly positive response to it; it was focussed on the person being coached and what they need to get to where they want to go – the coachee's cognition and growth. Teacher participants noted that, when operating as cognitive coaches, allowing the teachers' ideas to lead the discussion meant that conversations were "completely different" to where they "would have taken that conversation." This was about honoring teachers' diverse ways of thinking and different capacities for cognition and reflection: "Cognitive coaching is not getting people to think the same but getting people to think more clearly about what they're doing." Both teacher participants stressed the "teacher-focussed and teacher-led" focus of cognitive coaching. That is, the coaching conversations were focussed on "the actual teacher themselves," with the teacher as active thinker, director, and participator in discussion, and coach as listener, mirror, and mediator. "We're not really telling them, 'You're not doing this, you're not doing that, you need to improve that' – they're figuring all that out for themselves." From the teacher participants' perspective, as they reflected on the brain research on which cognitive coaching is based (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2013; Costa and Garmston, 2003; Jack *et al.*, 2013), it's "human nature: you don't really listen to people when they tell you what you need to do, do you? You only really change what you're doing when you identify things for yourself." They also felt liberated by the focus of cognitive coaching on facilitating the problem solving capacities of coached teachers. As coach, they did not need to generate answers, and when they left a coaching conversation, it was the coachee who continued to think about the conversation.

Working with cognitive coaching was a catalyst for reflecting on the teachers' professional identities. It made one teacher "really stop and think" about the way they converse with students and staff; "whereas before I may have jumped in to try and help or rescue or answer […] [now I] try and get people to self-actualize and do more for themselves rather than just be the person that sorts out all the problems." In an effort to encourage students and teachers to become more self-authoring learners, they now try to use questioning, classroom interaction, and professional dialogue to "make people – students and adults – more self-aware and self-directed."

Additionally, like the researcher, while observing lessons for the purposes of coaching others, both teachers found that observing the lessons of others impacted their own teaching practice; they found themselves borrowing or drawing from other teachers' teaching.

As for the researcher, cognitive coaching training and practice impacted the way teacher participants perceived their roles, not only in the Teacher Growth

Initiative team, but also in other arenas such as classrooms, teaching teams, and even personal relationships. Like the researcher, both teacher participants rethought what it was that was helpful to teachers in growing their practice, reflecting that mediating thinking seemed more empowering, effective, and helpful than giving advice.

School leaders: empowering others and setting off "oil in water" school change

> With one [person] in particular that I was having difficulty with – and there was much tears and gnashing of teeth – I'd tried numerous ways to get alongside this particular person. I can still remember after my first couple of days of cognitive coaching, I changed where I actually spoke to him. So I spoke to him at a round table and had a document that we were working on there so that became the third party. And just setting up side by side just blew me out of the water. It just completely changed the dynamic and then having the third party thing there to refer to took all of the emotion out of it. So those sorts of things, realizing that I didn't have to fix people's problems, that was a big turning point and then having the skills to coach others to be self-directed was the next sort of big turning point professionally in terms of how I operated as a leader. And really that's driven me ever since in terms of how I see leadership and all of the processes that I put in place (school leader).

While not a part of the Teacher Growth Initiative team, which was made up entirely of teachers, the 11 school leaders of this study, four of which had previously been trained in cognitive coaching, were all responsible for leading the growth of other staff. All 11 leaders were focussed on the notion of continuous improvement for themselves, their teams, their staff, and their students.

All school leader participants perceived the Teacher Growth Initiative as about enabling teachers to develop their own understanding of their teaching and their students' learning. Each teacher was "challenging their own thinking and perceptions of their reality," rather than managers evaluating. Mutually trusting coaching relationships were viewed as more likely to lead to "ownership" of learning and the active seeking of improvement, than "some external or top-down evaluation." In a coaching relationship, a "big turning point" for one school leader was "realizing that," as leader and coach, "I didn't have to fix people's problems" and then developing "the skills to coach others to be self-directed." Eight leaders saw their leadership role as one of building capacity and empowering their staff and facilitating the development of self-directed individuals. For one leader, this realization – that the role of leader is about empowerment and facilitating the development of self-directed individuals – has "driven me ever since in terms of how I see leadership and all of the processes I put in place." Another commented that, although sometimes it is "easier" and "faster" to do it themselves, taking that approach "comes at a cost" to individuals and to the organization, "because it enables people to not have to take full ownership, to just take ownership of the bits that they're really comfortable in."

Five leaders discussed the Teacher Growth Initiative as a direct reflection and embodiment of their own values around learning and leading. For one, cognitive coaching "naturally aligns" with their beliefs about learning and their roles, particularly for one leader, "how I view empowerment." For another, the initiative sat comfortably with their philosophies of building the strengths of others, encouraging teachers to "become more self-aware, more reflective […] to express what you're good at, where you need to go and how you need to get there." One saw their leadership work as partly to uncover others' thinking and below-the-surface beliefs, that their role is to bring consciousness to deeply held beliefs and values.

The cognitive coaching approach sat well with eight school leaders' core beliefs about empowerment and facilitating self-management of growth and learning, but some wondered if some teachers might react negatively to that approach. One explained, "If someone came in to watch me teach and didn't say anything nice afterwards at all, I think I might feel a bit rejected (laughs)." One wondered if "it could be too self-directed […] or even peer-directed" in a way that leaves leaders out of the process of working alongside and guiding their staff, or leaves individual teachers without the tools and help needed to improve.

In discussion about their own learning, five school leader participants discussed professional coaching relationships in which they were coachee and which helped them talk through challenging leadership times and scenarios. Here the coaching relationship provided a dedicated space to work through professional problems outside of the school context, with a trusted individual who challenged and promoted thinking, and provided a protected space for thinking and vulnerability.

Six school leaders had already noted a change in the professional culture of Lutwidge School as a result of the Teacher Growth Initiative, with one describing this as a "qualitative" sense that already "there is a shift." Increased teacher collaboration was already perceived to be occurring as a result of the initiative through, for instance, the creation of small teams, peer support, and across-school connections. These school leaders found it rewarding to see and lead growth of the Teacher Growth Initiative teachers, fulfilling the goal of growing staff as reflective self-directed professionals. Comments included that teachers involved had "enjoyed what it was," "found it really interesting," seen it as a "good product," found it meaningful, and "significantly better" than their experiences of other school processes, such as appraisal and evaluation.

One school leader described the change they were seeing as a result of the Teacher Growth Initiative as like "oil in water," "insidious," and "wonderful." "You don't know where it's going to go," the "difference" it will make, or the "impact" it will have.

A magnifying glass moment in time: limitations

This study may be seen as limited by its specific context, its small unrepresentative sample of participants, and its limited duration. Yet in examining 14 individuals in one school, from three participant groups, the study was able to provide deep insights into teachers' and leaders' lived experiences of a coaching intervention. While some may view the researcher's insider-outsider subjectivity as limiting, it may be seen as an important lens through which to view school reform and educator perspectives: from within the school system rather than outside it.

Coaching as situated growth catalyst: discussion

This study found that being a coach and being a coachee are empowering and identity-shaping experiences. Coaching can incite non-linear growth and result in unexpected impacts; it requires a trust-based non-judgmental coach-coachee relationship, and cognitive coaching is not a lone answer to professional growth. These findings are discussed below.

Coaching and being coached can incite empowerment, capacity building, non-linear growth, and unexpected impacts

The cognitive coaching approach aligns with Barber and Mourshed's (2007) keys to improving teachers' instructional practices: becoming aware of one's own approaches

and weaknesses, delivering effective instruction, gaining understanding of best practices, and being motivated to improve. Cognitive coaching, as experienced by the participants in this study, works on cognition and self-directedness, developing an awareness of self, reflective capacity, and intrinsic propulsion to improve.

While the researcher, one teacher participant, and three school leaders had initial reservations about coaching, they reflected that being coached was impactful for their teaching practice, inciting them to reflect on and adjust their own lessons. Being a coach also shaped their identities and practices of teaching. Through coaching conversations, coaching became a way of being. It shaped the ways participants had conversations with colleagues, partners, students they taught, and their own children at home, reflecting Batt's (2010) finding that cognitive coaching can work to shift teachers' perceptions and practices.

This study showed cognitive coaching to be potentially transformative for coach and coachee and an effective choice, especially in conjunction with the Danielson Framework for Teaching, for a growth-focussed professional learning model. It indicated that professional growth and the impacts of coaching can be uncomfortable, surprising, and non-linear. Unexpected, synaptic learning happenings reflect Garmston and Wellman's (2013) dynamical school principle "tiny events create major disturbances"; seemingly minor moments can have substantial impacts on educators and their practices. "Minor disturbances" in this case included impactful moments such as, seeing others' lessons, developing new professional relationships, cognitive coaching training, and coaching conversations as both coach and coachee. These shifted core beliefs, shaped senses of self, and altered learning trajectories. The researcher's, teachers', and leaders' stories reflect fluid, butterfly effect growth with a multiplicity of intersecting and colliding influences. Like the participant metaphors of oil in water or dandelion seeds on the breeze, this study pointed to small and sometimes unexpected epiphanic moments as being vital for the growth and (trans)formation of teachers and leaders. Small things, within the coaching process, can be catalysts for deep personal learning and lasting individual change.

Coaching for growth requires a trust-based non-judgmental coach-coachee relationship

A key belief underpinning Lutwidge School's Teacher Growth Initiative was that teachers at the school have the capacity for self-reflection and growth. This led to the choice of a cognitive coaching model in which non-hierarchical trust-focussed relationships were utilized to facilitate teachers' growth in self-directedness, reflection on practice, efficacy, and willingness to take risks and be vulnerable. The coaching model studied here takes a philosophical position consistent with the findings of research that promotes compassion-based rather than deficiency-based coaching (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2013; Jack *et al.*, 2013) and which advocates for environments of safety and trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Trust in the Teacher Growth Initiative context was fostered at organizational and individual levels, from the school strategic level, embedded in the design of the model, and in the choice of cognitive coaching. Cognitive coaching by trained teachers focussed on mediating thinking within non-hierarchical relationships, rather than telling or managing teachers. Teachers were seen as drivers of their own development, rather than as recipients of advice.

This study surfaced teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of an in practice, school-based coaching intervention. Reflecting the work of Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Tschannen-Moran (2014), participants here felt more positive about, and identified

experiences as transformative, when their learning experiences felt self-authored or in which they felt their own capacity was trusted. Teacher participants were driven in their learning and work by a deep sense of purpose (Barendsen *et al.*, 2011; Fullan, 2011), partly as a result of being made able to lead the initiative, as recommended by Louis (2006), and supported by Timperley *et al.* (2007) who found that having teachers actively leading professional learning opportunities impacts positively on student outcomes.

In the main, participants responded positively to the cognitive coaching model as the cornerstone of the Teacher Growth Initiative. It provoked thinking and provided space for reflection (Charteris and Smardon, 2014). The coach-coachee relationship was seen as central to professional growth, affirming that trust and credibility in the coaching relationship are the key to productive open conversations (Heineke, 2013). The non-evaluative non-hierarchical coaching model helped the researcher and teachers to feel in control of their learning even in the face of vulnerability. That teachers were coaches was felt by these participants to be important, confirming that the relationship must be safe, confidential, and non-evaluative, and that coaching relationships in which there is a hierarchical imbalance or an evaluation may be counter-productive (Costa and Garmston, 2003; Heineke, 2013). This supports arguments that developing a collaborative professional learning culture is best served by a non-evaluative minimally hierarchical environment (Joyce and Showers, 1988) and that professional learning is a situated social practice and collective process profoundly influenced by environment (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Wenger, 2000), and by the social networks in personal and professional contexts. Participants were aware of the tensions in relationships, particularly as a result of imbalance of authority or confusion of purpose, and were able to articulate and navigate these tensions.

A trusting environment and relationship are especially crucial given the vulnerability of teachers in reflecting honestly on their own practice within the coaching relationship. Researcher and teacher participants noted uncomfortable growth moments, including being a coachee in coaching conversations about less-than-successful lessons. With the support of a coach, these experiences of disequilibrium within an environment of trust (Costa and Garmston, 2003) resulted in learning and growth. These experiences indicate that it is a combination of care and challenge, discomfort and support, which can lead to breaking through learning barriers into new spaces of understanding, new ways of thinking, or new levels of skill. These findings suggest that coaching relationships are likely to work best when they operate as a "holding environment" (Drago-Severson, 2009; Winnicott, 1960), which is a highly supportive place for teachers and leaders to grow. School leaders' comments that teachers were challenging their own thinking, rather than being evaluated, are consistent with scholars who advocate for positive drivers for education which develop cultures of growth rather than fear and compliance (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Hattie, 2015a, b). This study is consistent with others that reveal positive, collaborative, and self-authored learning experiences as creating an upswing of growth (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2013; Costa and Garmston, 2003; Jack *et al.*, 2013).

Cognitive coaching can be supplemented by other tools for, and approaches to, teacher growth

While cognitive coaching was seen by participants as having a positive impact on teachers' and coaches' professional growth, it was not perceived as the only answer or a

stand-alone solution. There were some reservations around the use of a cognitive coaching model for reflecting on and improving teacher practice. For example, a cognitive coaching model does not necessarily develop expertise in or understanding of best practices. By relying on the internal capacities of the coachee, taking a purely coaching role when cognitive coaching (as opposed to the other cognitive coaching "support functions" of evaluating, consulting, and collaborating) means that teachers do not have access to resources external to themselves. In this study there were questions from teacher and leader participants around its use and its appropriateness for all individuals and all situations. Some leaders worried that a one-size-fits-all approach to coaching and professional growth was problematic. Some school leader participants in this study echoed the concerns of other studies (Cordingley and Buckler, 2012; Goker, 2006) that some teachers might have difficulty being self-reflective or might lack self-awareness, diagnostic skills for own practice, a repertoire of language for reflection, or strategies for improvement. This suggests that a cognitive coaching approach may not, in itself, be enough to build internal teacher capacity and raises the question of where teachers might get help in knowing and understanding what strategies they might use or how their pedagogy might develop.

There are, however, clues that arise from this study as to what kinds of additional explicit support might benefit teachers in their growth and development. Lutwidge School offered additional options for developing teachers' teaching such as instructional pedagogical consultants, traditional professional development courses, professional learning communities, and mentored action research opportunities. That the Teacher Growth Initiative coaching model is an intervention that sits alongside other learning opportunities reflects Cordingley and Buckler's (2012) suggestion of a parallel approach of specialists working alongside coaches. Teachers can also be resources for each other. The researcher and teachers in this study discussed observing others' lessons as an impetus to making incremental changes to their own classroom practice. Encouraging teachers to visit each other's classrooms, in addition to a data-based cognitive coaching cycle, can result in the sharing of knowledge (Barber and Mourshed, 2007), heightened reflection on one's own teaching, and in the collective development of teaching practices in a school.

A knowledge of best practices might benefit from the use of a framework like the Danielson Framework for Teaching, which can show, through its specific rubric descriptors and examples, what excellent teaching might look like. The Danielson Framework for Teaching was used in the Teacher Growth Initiative to develop precision of language for teaching practice and breadth of reflection; the researcher and teacher participants found the framework to be a tool that developed and focussed their reflections on their own teaching practice, and their coaching conversations with other teachers. A framework of teaching can act, not as a scorecard of performance as it is used in some places, but as the basis for professional conversation and an empowering tool for improvement.

Coaching for professional growth is a contextually situated balancing act: conclusion

This paper began by noting that cultures of fear and compliance are negative and unproductive drivers for individual and organizational development. The present study sought to paint, in miniature, a portrait of a coaching model in a school setting, which had as its focus growth, collaboration, and empowerment. It presents a snapshot of the perceptions of three groups: the researcher (also a teacher and school leader),

teachers (also coaches of other teachers), and school leaders, including middle leaders who are often absent from literature on coaching and professional growth. For the researcher, coaching and being coached shaped professional identity. Teachers found coaching and being coached to shift their beliefs about learning and teaching. School leaders took the strategic view that a coaching model, which trusts the capacities of teachers to reflect and improve, was empowering and capacity building.

These insider perspectives show that being part of a school-based cognitive coaching model is an identity-shaping experience, which can have positive, unexpected, non-linear impacts on and beyond individuals. The combination of being a coach and coachee can also facilitate empowerment, professional growth, and changes in practice. The Danielson Framework for Teaching is an example of a tool that has the potential to enhance the impact of coaching conversations and teacher reflection on practice. Supporting teachers in leading their own learning through coaching, and trusting in them as reflective professionals with the capacity for self-reflection, is a small step toward involving teachers as leaders and learners within schools.

Context is a key consideration for those schools undertaking coaching initiatives. The Teacher Growth Initiative grew out of the Lutwidge School context. Despite the predominantly positive reception of this coaching model by these participants, it is not proposed that this model be applied to other schools. As all schools are different, initiatives cannot be lifted from one school and imposed directly on another, but benefit from emerging out of each context (Hargreaves, 2015). So, although schools might be able to consider the strategically directed but bottom-up approach of the Teacher Growth Initiative, and its use of a combination of cognitive coaching and the Danielson Framework for Teaching, coaching literature would benefit from additional perspectives on a variety of coaching models in a range of contexts.

A belief in the capacity of teachers for reflection and growth implies that everyone is coachable, yet issues about the effects of hierarchical relationships on an individual's authenticity, openness, and vulnerability remain. When deciding who will coach teachers, schools should consider the ways in which trust, rapport, and emotion influence learning. Coachees might be best served by coaches who are not also their managers, as unequal power and managerial authority is potentially damaging for the coaching relationship. If the purpose of a school-based coaching intervention is teacher professional growth and improvement in practice, as with the Teacher Growth Initiative, then coaching should not be conflated with evaluation, performance management, or consultation.

This study revealed that developing school structures, such as coaching models, which are "inside out" rather than "top down" (Nazareno, 2016), can positively impact teachers and schools. The intervention studied – which used a balance of top-down and bottom-up practices, as advocated for by Malone (2015) – appealed to teacher and school leader participants of this study. The important question, raised by a leader in this study, of whether school governance might lead to the Teacher Growth Initiative evolving over time into a more top-down, less teacher-trusting approach, suggests that schools should consider ways to protect, maintain, and explicitly communicate the initial intents of change interventions so that they are not undermined over time.

Note

1. The Danielson Framework for Teaching, and its use in the Teacher Growth Initiative, is outlined in more detail in the Appendix and Figure A1.

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Appendix

Lutwidge School selected Danielson's Framework for Teaching – explained in the most detail in *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* (Danielson, 2008) – as a map of what excellence in teaching might look like, providing a set of shared, explicit descriptors. Grounded in research, it is a thorough, multi-layered definition of good teaching that identifies a comprehensive range of teacher responsibilities. The framework is intended to be part of processes such as teacher reflection, professional inquiry, classroom observations, mentoring, coaching, and teacher appraisal. The use of such a framework depersonalizes conversations about teaching, focussing discussion on specific elements of practice, rather than on the individual.

The Teacher Growth Initiative used the Danielson Framework in the following ways:

- Teacher Growth Initiative team members were trained by a Danielson Group consultant in generating lesson data and using the framework in professional conversations.
- The Teacher Growth Initiative team designed an annual online self-reflection for teachers to complete against the framework, in order to surface reflections about their teaching, help them set goals, and guide their thinking as they plan for the year ahead.
- During coaching conversations, coaches help teachers to consider their lesson data against the Danielson Framework, looking closely at the descriptors and facilitating reflection against the rubrics.
- The Danielson Framework sits alongside the Australian National Professional Standards for Teachers as a tool for deepening reflection and conversation about practice, allowing teachers to more specifically envisage, articulate, and enact excellence in teaching practice.

The framework clusters its 22 components of teaching into four domains of teacher responsibility. The components are intended to be applicable to diverse settings and independent of any particular teaching methodology. In *The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument* (Danielson, 2013) each component is broken down into a series of descriptors and examples of what it looks like when it is "unsatisfactory," "basic," "proficient," and "distinguished." *The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument* can be downloaded here: www.danielsongroup.org/download/?download = 448. A visual overview similar to Figure A1, can be downloaded here: www.danielsongroup.org/download/?download=720

Figure A1.
The Danielson Framework for Teaching domains and components

DOMAIN 1: Planning and Preparation	DOMAIN 2: The Classroom Environment
1a Demonstrating Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy Content knowledge; Prerequisite relationships; Content pedagogy 1b Demonstrating Knowledge of Students Child development; Learning process; Special needs; Student skills, knowledge, and proficiency; Interests and cultural heritage 1c Setting Instructional Outcomes Value, sequence, and alignment; Clarity; Balance; Suitability for diverse learners 1d Demonstrating Knowledge of Resources For classroom; To extend content knowledge; For students 1e Designing Coherent Instruction Learning activities; Instructional materials and resources; Instructional groups; Lesson and unit structure 1f Designing Student Assessments Congruence with outcomes; Criteria and standards; Formative assessments; Use for planning	2a Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport Teacher interaction with students; Student interaction with students 2b Establishing a Culture for Learning Importance of content Expectations for learning and achievement; Student pride in work 2c Managing Classroom Procedures Instructional groups; Transitions; Materials and supplies; Non-instructional duties; Supervision of volunteers and paraprofessionals 2d Managing Student Behavior Expectations; Monitoring behavior; Response to misbehavior 2e Organizing Physical Space Safety and accessibility; Arrangement of furniture and resources
DOMAIN 4: Professional Responsibilities	DOMAIN 3: Instruction
4a Reflecting on Teaching Accuracy; Use in future teaching 4b Maintaining Accurate Records Student completion of assignments; Student progress in learning; Non-instructional records 4c Communicating with Families About instructional program; About individual students; Engagement of families in instructional program 4d Participating in a Professional Community Relationships with colleagues; Participation in school projects; Involvement in culture of professional inquiry; Service to school 4e Growing and Developing Professionally Enhancement of content knowledge/pedagogical skill; Receptivity to feedback from colleagues; Service to the profession 4f Showing Professionalism Integrity/ethical conduct; Service to students; Advocacy; Decision making; Compliance with school/district regulation	3a Communicating With Students Expectations for learning; Directions and procedures; Explanations of content; Use of oral and written language 3b Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques Quality of questions; Discussion techniques; Student participation 3c Engaging Students in Learning Activities and assignments; Student groups; Instructional materials and resources; Structure and pacing 3d Using Assessment in Instruction Assessment criteria; Monitoring of student learning; Feedback to students; Student self-assessment and monitoring 3e Demonstrating Flexibility and Responsiveness Lesson adjustment; Response to students; Persistence

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