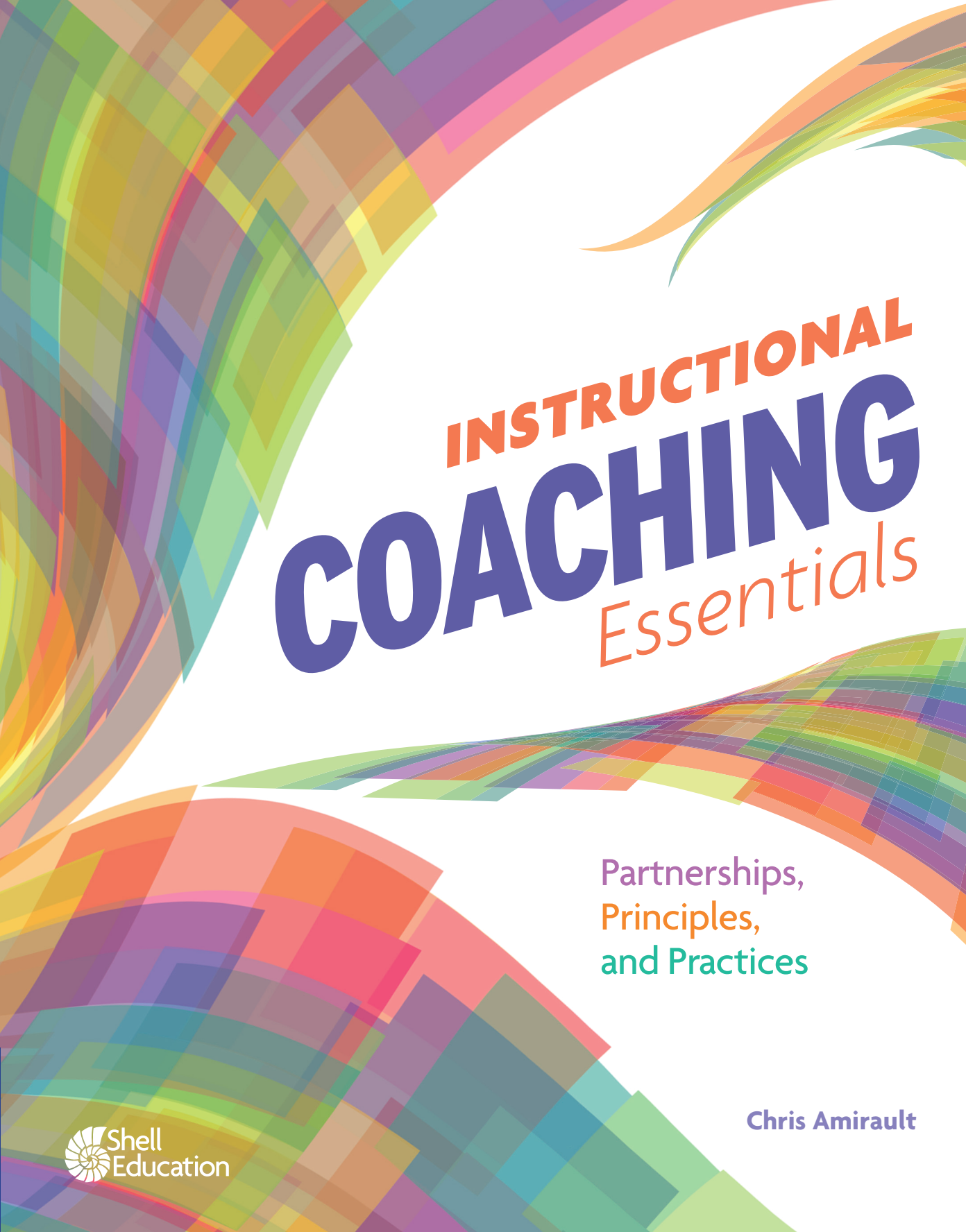




INSTRUCTIONAL **COACHING** Essentials

Partnerships,
Principles,
and Practices

Chris Amirault



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Introduction

Have you ever had a great coach? Someone who was able both to find something in you that you didn't know was there and to help you cultivate it? Someone whose voice lives in your head when you swing that racket or pinch that pot? Someone who found ways to transform not only what you were doing but how and why you did it?

At its best, coaching can be an intimate, meaningful experience, yet it usually unfolds within a process that's hard to sort out. Welcome to *Instructional Coaching Essentials*, where we will demystify the alchemy of instructional coaching.

Instructional Coaching Essentials provides educators with a foundational understanding of what instructional coaching is (and is not), why it works (or doesn't work), and how you can implement that working knowledge in any coaching situation. There are dozens of outstanding books about specific coaching systems, some of which you'll read about here. But this book isn't making the case for a particular coaching system, nor is it focused on a particular content area or grade level. *Instructional Coaching Essentials* gives you the tools to make instructional coaching truly sing in whatever situations you encounter.

If you are currently an instructional coach working with classroom educators or a teacher aspiring to be one, *Instructional Coaching Essentials* will be particularly useful for you. We'll explore the research and best practices that can amplify the impact of your work with teachers. But no matter your role or position, this book offers many insights about what you can do to support your own and others' teaching and learning. If you are a classroom teacher, you can transform your instructional know-how with the information about adult learning and behavior change. If you are a department chair or administrator, *Instructional Coaching Essentials* can help you fold effective performance improvement strategies into your supervisory relationships with educators, including instructional coaches themselves. Faculty in higher education teacher training programs, trainers of instructional coaches, and others will also find ways to enhance their own teaching.

Let's take a look at how the book will unfold.

Chapter 1 focuses on a basic question: Why coach? It explores both the reasons that schools and districts invest precious funding in coaching systems and the evidence for what does and doesn't support real, positive change in classrooms. Even more importantly, the first chapter asks you to reflect on why, exactly, *you* have chosen to take on the role of coach. If you are like most coaches, you have taught in classrooms of your own, and at some point you decided that you had a lot to offer not only the children in those classrooms but the adults teaching in classrooms around you. Exploring these reflections about your drive to support learning and improve teaching is critical to understanding the nuances of your own embodiment of instructional coaching.

Chapter 2 focuses on adult learning basics. Along with a few familiar insights into which we'll breathe new life, the chapter also includes quite a few surprises. Starting with brain basics, we'll cover the core principles necessary to support adult learning and behavior change in every coaching situation. After that, we'll do a deep dive into an understanding of how motivation works, both your own motivation and that of the teachers you coach. Avoiding terms like "coachee" and "client," we'll be calling those teachers you coach "partners," and this chapter explains that crucial term. Calibrating your coaching to promote strong interpersonal relationships is, as you'll see, essential.

Of course, coaching relationships unfold within specific systems that can promote or harm those relationships. Chapter 3 explores a core confusion at the heart of many coaching relationships, the failure to recognize the crucial differences between coaching and supervision. After prompting you to define "coach" and "coaching" in your own situation, we will explore how the systems within which we coach impact the roles we play. We will tease out these complicated dynamics by considering how power and control flow through three quite different examples of coaching and supervision, examples that structure the relationship between coach and partner in very different ways. That consideration will require you to reflect not only on the systems within which you coach but also on the "unmentionables" that are usually baked into those systems, impediments that, if left unexplored, can derail effective coaching for you and your partners.

After laying the foundation for your approach to coaching, chapter 4 assembles a coaching logistics toolkit. We'll identify some of the challenging aspects that hamper good coaching relationships, like limited time and non-private spaces, and assemble strategies and approaches that allow you to work within those constraints most effectively. You'll then have a chance to build an approach to coaching interactions that will help you determine the specific elements of preparation, collaboration, and follow-through that work best for you.

Once you have your tools in place, you'll set them down and make some decisions about the sorts of expectations you want to set for yourself and your partners when using those tools.

Chapter 5 focuses on the critical need to establish your own coaching principles, regardless of the particulars of any given situation or coaching system. Remembering that effective coaching can best unfold within a successful relationship, we will reflect on the lessons from chapters 1 to 4 so that you can devise a set of principles to guide you in every encounter.

Finally, chapter 6 turns our attention to adapting to the specific coaching approach you use in your work, identifying the elements you need to understand, negotiate, and employ to make that coaching system work best for you and your partners. Reflecting on what you've learned in the previous chapters and taking a careful look at what you can and cannot control in your given coaching situation, you'll finish the book with a sense of renewed energy and empowerment for this critical work, regardless of the inevitable challenges or limitations baked into every coaching system.

“Investigating who you are when you coach is a foundational step toward understanding how to make yourself the best coach you can be. ”

As this overview suggests, you will find many opportunities to pause your reading and devote time and attention to focused self-reflection. After all, while *Instructional Coaching Essentials* offers general strategies available to anyone, you—with your particular history, strengths, and foibles—are the actor putting those strategies into practice! Investigating who you are when you coach is a foundational step toward understanding how to make yourself the best coach you can be.

So let's get started!



CHAPTER 1 Why (Do You) Coach?

Instructional Coaching Essentials is founded on contemporary research and best practices that establish a largely uniform set of insights and understandings about how to be the best coach you can be. Our first step is sifting through that research to define instructional coaching itself.

Defining Instructional Coaching

Here's a working definition we'll use and revise throughout the book:

***Instructional coaching** is a structured form of collaborative interpersonal interaction in which a coach trained in the practice develops a reflective relationship with a partner to activate their motivation to improve their instructional practices, thereby enhancing both student learning and educator self-efficacy.*

That's a mouthful! Let's break that definition down into its components, assuming for now that it refers to a best-case coaching scenario. (Don't worry: We'll dive into less-than-best cases soon!)

A structured form of collaborative interpersonal interaction: Instructional coaching is a unique form of professional development for teachers. Instead of training that unfolds in a workshop, book study, or conference, instructional coaching unfolds through a human relationship created by two individuals. The relationship is entirely collaborative: Both individuals are working together for a shared goal, taking responsibility for the various components of that relationship. It's not unidirectional, with one person (the coach) telling someone else (the teacher) what to do! We will focus on that collaboration throughout the book.

In addition, coaching is not an informal or free-form relationship; though flexible, it doesn't unfold willy-nilly. Rather, both parties operate within a specific professional structure

governed by set expectations and shared goals. The elements of that structure are driven by strategies that help the relationship to be as engaged and productive as possible. Those elements can include observation, feedback, modeling, and goal-setting, often determined by the specific coaching system a school or district implements. In chapter 6, we will talk about how coaches can best use these elements as they function within those specific systems.

While we live in a world that, in many ways, is being transformed by artificial intelligence, this book is written to guide and support the practices of flesh-and-blood human coaches like you. As a result, we will not be exploring forms of AI “coaching” that necessarily fall outside of this definition.

A coach trained in the practice: Instructional coaches don’t just happen. To provide the support and guidance to make those components of instructional coaching successful, coaches need to develop a specific combination of skills, knowledge, and mindset. To be sure, every coach is informed by their own past experiences in education (experiences that you will explore later in this chapter). But those experiences—especially those involving the teaching of children—are not enough. Coaches must enhance their understanding of the complex interpersonal and systemic nuances baked into every coaching situation to build upon the foundation those important experiences provide.

Much of the training instructional coaches receive derives from specific coaching systems. But in *Instructional Coaching Essentials*, we will dive below those specifics, deep into the foundational research, best practices, and principles required to guide their use. Research on adult learning, behavior change, effective reflection practices, and interpersonal collaboration are all essential to every aspect of instructional coaching; without an understanding of them, the specific elements of any given system is unlikely to work. As a result, we will devote much attention to that content throughout the book.

A reflective relationship with a partner: Like most instructional coaching approaches, we will define a successful relationship as one that activates mutually beneficial reflection between the coach and the teacher being coached. A good coach doesn’t merely prompt the reflection of the teacher being coached; rather, both people participate in reflection within the dynamic of the relationship they create. Usually, that reflective relationship must acknowledge and devote time to untangling the interpersonal and institutional complications of power that manifest within the situation—complications that can be awkward indeed! But, as we’ll explore in chapter 3, an effective reflective collaboration includes “mentioning the unmentionables,” especially any that are troubling features of the relationship itself.

Though the coach often serves as a guide for the unfolding relationship, they always maintain a foundational recognition of the teacher’s autonomy. Unfortunately, some of the vocabulary used to define coaching doesn’t recognize that autonomy. So, as mentioned in

the introduction, we'll be leaving behind terms like "coachee" and "client" and using a more accurate word throughout the book: To emphasize this collaborative relationship, we'll be calling teachers being coached "partners."

This choice isn't window dressing; rather, it acknowledges a fundamental fact. If a coach doesn't understand that they are partners with the teacher they are coaching, they simply cannot provide effective coaching. And if the teacher feels that they are being treated like a broken object that needs to be repaired by someone else, they will likely reject even the most useful repair advice. Thus, in an effective coaching relationship, the teacher is truly a full partner in the process and, ultimately, the change agent in practice. Your efforts are doomed unless you recognize that your partner's agency and autonomy are the only way to transform instruction.

“If a coach doesn't understand that they are partners with the teacher they are coaching, they simply cannot provide effective coaching.”

To activate their motivation: One fundamental misunderstanding that we will explore in chapter 2 involves the role of motivation in a fruitful instructional coaching partnership. Often, when people first learn about human behavior change, they receive two opposing models of motivation. *Intrinsic motivation* comes from within the individual being coached, a desire for self-improvement that is independent of any outside forces. *Extrinsic motivation* is the name for those outside forces, imposed on a person by individuals and groups who can, it would seem, force behavior change regardless of someone's intrinsic motivation.

We are going to explore a more nuanced understanding of motivation. In chapter 2, we'll discuss a mode of interaction coaches can use to activate motivation, one that travels through both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to extend and transform both. An effective coach knows that the motivation that matters is not just activated in dialogue but more importantly carried from the coaching session into the classroom itself, thus transforming actual instructional practice.

Indeed, the best coaches know that activating this sort of traveling motivation is both the means and the end in a powerful coaching relationship. What happens in coaching interactions themselves is certainly crucial, but if a relationship generates excellent reflection and dialogue but no change in the classroom, it's not impacting children's learning in an ongoing manner.

To improve their instructional practices: Regardless of the content area, grade level, or coaching system, all instructional coaches seek to identify strengths and cultivate growth areas in the understanding, skills, and mindset of teachers, informed by related practices such as reviewing assessment data and planning lessons within a given curricular scope and sequence. But those practices arise in coaching relationships primarily to improve the teacher's day-to-day instructional decision-making and actions in an ongoing way, both within and outside the classroom.

Notice that “improve” suggests that at least some of the partner's instructional practices are pretty good to start with! Unfortunately, many coaches focus their attention only on identifiable problems. They use student data, teacher observations, videos, performance evaluations, and more to identify problems and seek to correct misunderstandings, cultivate missing skills, and reprogram the mindset of teachers who aren't up to snuff.

It's no accident why this happens! For most of us, it seems obvious that any instructional improvements require close attention to what's not working instead of what is working. In addition, our brains tend to sort on the negative, identifying the handful of problems that stand out while ignoring the many positive attributes that are plain to see if only we noticed.

Our brains' tendency to sort on the negative is a real problem in coaching relationships. After all, no one wants to feel that their teaching practice is, at base, a failure. No teacher wants to be defined by a set of selected problems, isolated from the entirety of their effort and practice, and few teachers will find the energy or motivation to be “fixed” once they've been labeled as “wrong.” In addition, a coach who seeks to “fix” a teacher likely hasn't sought to identify the very strengths on which they can build their collaborative efforts.

Enhancing both student learning and educator self-efficacy: Without question, the reason schools and districts devote money, time, and effort to instructional coaching is to improve student outcomes. But the most productive coaching relationships link student learning to an educator's own sense of themselves as both a wonderful teacher and a lifelong learner. Teachers want to help students learn, to know that they are good at teaching, and to feel that what they do matters. That's why we became teachers in the first place!

“ The most productive coaching relationships link student learning to an educator's own sense of themselves as both a wonderful teacher and a lifelong learner. ”

Good coaches enhance all of those qualities not merely because they seek enjoyable, productive coaching sessions. Good coaches acknowledge the link between student learning and educator self-efficacy because the transformations they seek can only happen when that link is activated. Of course, every coaching session is itself a lesson not only for the partner but also for the coach! So as you cultivate the mindset of a lifelong learner in your partners, you'll need to embrace the same mindset yourself.

Unpacking Coaching in Different Contexts

We will return throughout the book to this definition of instructional coaching. In addition, you will delve into your own understandings of coaching by reflecting on the experiences you've had that impact your actions. For most of us, that requires exploring what other definitions of coaching may be apparent—or lurking!—in our own practices. So let's look at two different coaching contexts that have several things in common but that present very different challenges to the coach.

Exploring Athletic Coaching

I think many people, like me, first consider athletics when they think about coaching. There certainly are similarities between athletic and instructional coaching, but if we look closely, we can see some important differences when we move from the gym or playing field to the classroom. Here's my story.

When my daughter was in late elementary school, I was a basketball coach for our community team. We met twice a week in a school gymnasium and held more or less organized practices to develop their skills in passing, defending, and shooting. We would execute drills to improve those skills, dribbling around cones and blocking out for rebounds. Often, we would scrimmage for part of the practice, setting up game situations and executing plays. Most of the time, the last ten minutes would degenerate into happy chaos.

Once or twice a week, we'd play a game against an opponent in our league. A referee kept things relatively orderly, and a small but enthusiastic crowd of family members cheered the kids on. The players would wear their uniforms, do their best on the court, celebrate when they won, and amble off the court unhappily when they lost.

I loved coaching those teams. There was something about those relationships with my daughter and the group that felt rare and precious. And I often remember those feelings when I'm coaching educators or training instructional coaches themselves—because I can see how radically different these two types of coaching are when it comes to time and involvement.

For example, I spent at least five or six hours with the team each week during the season, and I was involved with them for 100 percent of their team activity. I was a witness not only for

the practices, devoted to teamwork and skill building, but for the games themselves as they unfolded, the events in which things learned in practice were put to the test. I could see how effective my efforts to coach them were, and I could make ongoing adjustments throughout both the games and the season based on what I learned.

From the Court to the Classroom

Compare time spent coaching basketball to time spent as an instructional coach. If a coach is in a well-resourced situation that prioritizes that work, they might have one or two hours every couple of weeks with the teacher they're coaching. Typically, that's one-on-one time used for reflection, planning, and so on. (And let's face it: There are many instructional coaches who feel lucky if they get half an hour every month to reconnect with their teachers; we shall return to this real-world scarcity later in the book!)

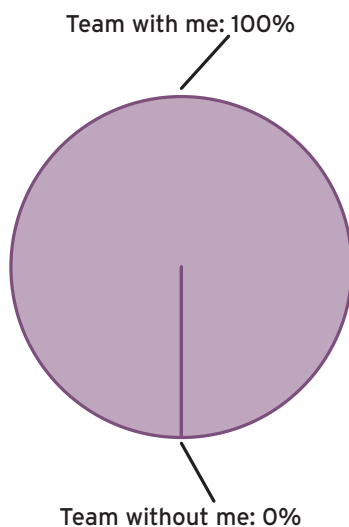
Another difference relates to how involved I could be in the actions of the dozen kids on our team. Typically, I was extremely engaged in both practices and games, making decisions to help our team improve while encouraging their efforts. Even when things degenerated into bedlam, I was able to witness the complex social dynamics of everyone involved: our team, the other team, and the adults. Finally, I wasn't the ultimate judge of "how they were doing": The scoreboard took care of that responsibility for the four months of the season.

Classrooms are very different places than basketball courts! Class sizes are routinely twice as large as my basketball team, and the students in classrooms create far more complex social systems. It's simply impossible for a coach to observe the vast majority of the experiences of teachers and students in this ever-changing social dynamic over the course of an entire school year. Most coaches spend only a fraction of their time witnessing the teaching itself as it unfolds, and their presence is the exception, not the rule, for what typically happens in that classroom.

Finally, while most instructional coaches may not feel particularly judgy, it's likely their partners regularly worry that the coach is furtively keeping score. Sometimes they're not wrong! As we'll see in chapter 3, the different roles some coaches play can indeed require monitoring or even supervision, complicating the coaching dynamic for both coach and partner. These dynamics can have a significant impact on a partner's behavior when they're under the coach's gaze.

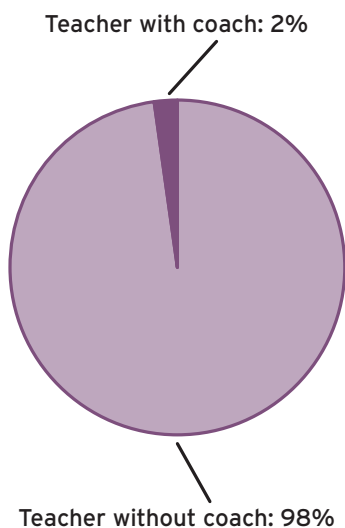
We can summarize the impact of these differences in time and involvement with the two pie charts on the next page.

First, let's look at the percentage of time in which I was involved as a coach in the basketball team's activities:



It's pretty obvious: Whenever the kids gathered as a team, I was there with them. That's what basketball coaches do! We were a team, in it together from start to finish.

Now, let's compare that graph to the percentage of time in which a typical instructional coach might interact with their teaching partner. If we estimate that the coach spends an hour or so every two weeks with that teacher, the graph looks more like this:



Of course, that's just time spent together, primarily or even exclusively outside of the classroom. Unlike a basketball coach, who is present for and can coach within games themselves, instructional coaches typically spend little or no time involved with teaching activities as they unfold in their partner's classroom. And if they are observing their partner's instruction in the classroom, it's likely that involvement will not provide an accurate, consistent perspective on what happens the other 98 percent of the time.

When it comes to time spent involved in the activity that brings coaches and partners together in the first place, sports beats education in a blowout! I've found it very useful to compare these two experiences as I approach my own instructional coaching with partners, and, in this first reflection, I encourage you to do the same.

REFLECTION

Take a moment to review the last few pages and reflect on your own experiences and understandings about coaching. What are the models or experiences you use from your own life? How do they shape your perception of the definition of instructional coaching above? How might those experiences affect your coaching relationships?

Despite these limitations on time and impact, instructional coaching has often proven to be a powerful way to support quality improvement in K–12 classrooms. A growing research base suggests that, when planned and implemented appropriately, instructional coaching really can work.

The key study demonstrating these findings, by Matthew Kraft, David Blazar, and Dylan Hogan, was a 2018 meta-analysis that reviewed sixty studies of instructional coaching in K–12 settings. The authors found that instructional coaching not only had a statistically significant impact on teachers' instructional practices but also a lesser (but still significant) impact on student achievement. Given the state of the research, it's too early to identify which specific coaching components work (embedding coaching into a teacher's regular practice in their classroom seems beneficial) and don't work (having a coach model instructional practice for the teacher seems far less so). That said, the limited research suggests that instructional coaching appears to hold unusual promise.

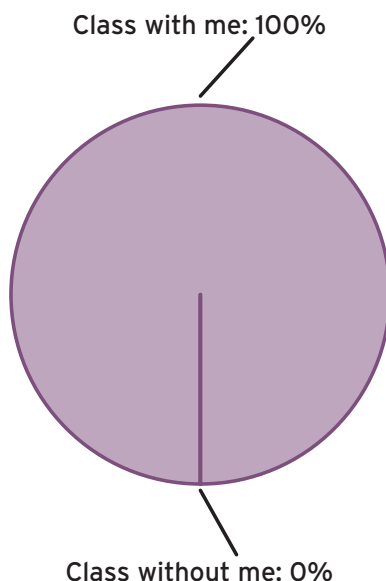
As a result of the optimism that this research encourages, many schools and districts have devoted resources to identifying, training, and employing coaches in their systems—people like you! We have some answers as to why schools and districts promote instructional coaching; it's time to ask a related question: Why do *you* coach?

The Shift from Classroom Teacher to Instructional Coach

To help set the stage for your reflection, let's go back to our two graphs and consider them from a more personal standpoint. If you are like most instructional coaches, you started your education career within the classroom itself. Of course, classroom teaching is vastly different from instructional coaching, but we often don't explore those differences. Indeed, when you think about it, classroom teaching has a lot more to do with coaching a girls' basketball team than you might think at first!

Like a neighborhood basketball coach, classroom teachers are embedded in the life of their community, often devoted to the children and families within that community in deep and profound ways. Each day for many months, classroom teachers spend hours with children to develop their skills, encourage their efforts, and help them achieve their goals. They are there for the practice, the implementation, and the results, able to watch children learn and grow thanks to both their own efforts and those of their students. And while classroom teachers certainly interact with other adults at times throughout their workday, the primary, day-to-day relationships occur inside their classrooms with the children they teach.

Remembering (or imagining) your experiences as a classroom teacher, let's create a new graph to reflect your time and impact with the children that comprised your classroom each year:



If you were a classroom teacher before you became an instructional coach, you had enormous power and lots of time to structure and guide children's development. And as we saw above, as an instructional coach you now have far less time and impact on the teachers whom you coach.

Like basketball coaches, classroom teachers learn to develop skills, knowledge, and mindset for working with children. As an instructional coach, you have to learn a new approach for working with a very different group of humans: adults who work as professional educators in your field. So let's pause for a moment and reflect on this radical shift from being a classroom teacher of kids to being an instructional coach with adults.

REFLECTION

Review the two graphs about time and impact of, respectively, classroom teachers and instructional coaches. Recalling your time in the classroom, try to evoke the moments when you had a sense that you were, in fact, a good teacher, serving your community and investing in your role as an effective teacher of children. Write down a few sentences about when those moments of self-efficacy occurred and exactly how you felt in them. What happened? Why did that happen?

Now zoom in on a different moment: when you started to consider stepping out of the classroom into the role of instructional coach. What were your first thoughts about that shift? What seemed enticing about that move? What were you hoping to attain—professionally, personally, financially, emotionally—and what were you hoping to leave behind? Finally, when you imagined the adults you would be coaching, with whom did you imagine working—or did you not think about those adults at all?

The Promise and Discomfort of Teaching and Learning

If you are like most of the coaches I've gotten to know over the decades, your professional history and experience are grounded in a deep commitment to supporting the children and families in your community. You found a way in your classroom to transcend the many constraints and obstructions teachers face in the United States, and you activated a sense of deep optimism about the power of schooling as a social force in the lives of others. Those values didn't simply sit on a motivational poster taped to your classroom wall, a clever quote about this or that. Rather, driven by that optimism, you devoted years to honing your craft, finding ways to enact the very principles you hold dear.