

Enhancing the Competence of Teacher Assistants

Using Teachers as Coaches to Support Professional Development in Real Time

by Lorraine Breffni

Teaching assistants (or aides) play a unique role in early childhood settings. At a minimum, they work collaboratively with the teacher to ensure the classroom runs like a well-oiled machine. They assist with curriculum preparation and implementation. They work under the guidance of the teacher to provide emotional and physical support to all children, including those with special educational needs. They tune in to the nuances of individual children and make adaptations for them. In addition to supporting the classroom teacher, assistants are frequently called upon, sometimes on very short notice, to lead classrooms when the teacher is absent.

But, as Janice's experience reveals, opportunities to support teacher assistants as they learn the 'tools of the teaching trade'



Dr. Lorraine Breffni is the Executive Director of Early Childhood and Parenting Institutes at Nova Southeastern University's Mailman Segal Center for Human Development. She directly supervises the operation of

three early childhood programs including an infant and toddler program; a preschool program; and a parent education program. Lorraine was previously employed as an instructor/mentor for the Community Outreach initiative at the Mailman Segal Center assisting preschool teachers as they enhanced emergent literacy practices in their classrooms and as they developed strategies to accommodate the needs of at-risk children and families. She has co-authored the text 'All About Child Care and Early Education' and its companion book *All About Child Care and Early Education: A Trainees Manual*.

Janice has been a teacher assistant in the four-year-old classroom for two years. She is comfortable and confident in many aspects of her role and has just completed her associate's degree. During her annual appraisal, Janice indicated to her supervisor that her heart sinks and her confidence plummets when the teacher is on vacation or is out for any reason. She feels that she goes into survival mode during the teacher's absence. Janice wants to be more effective in the classroom.

are often overlooked in the busy day-to-day reality of the classroom. What can we do to address this void in a meaningful and productive way? We know that assistants will not learn by osmosis — or by simply being in the presence of a good (or great) teacher. We know that one-shot workshops translate into changes in classroom practice only 10% of the time (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

However, we also know that coaching in real time — where a trusted colleague watches a peer try new skills in his own classroom and provides suggestions to improve practice — results in new skill adoption rates of 90% (Gawande, 2011).

Therefore, in light of recommendations that professional development interventions be grounded in deliberate classroom practice and focus more on the specific skills that are linked to improvements in the classroom (Levine, 2006), perhaps coaching offers the answer to fostering the growth of teacher assistants. Indeed, teacher assistants are

uniquely placed to benefit from this type of job-embedded learning. And, most importantly, perhaps the person best suited and available to build better assistants through individualized coaching in 'real time' is the classroom teacher; after all, they spend the best part of the day in each other's company.

The Coaching Partnership

On the day of the observation, the teacher sat just outside the meeting circle and took notes as Janice read to the children. She recorded what Janice said and did, and what the children said and did in response.

Coaching is not a new idea. Professional athletes, musicians, and singers recognize the value of using a coach to help them excel in their chosen fields. Within the context to teaching, however, coaching is an evidence-based practice that is defined as "one teacher helping

another to improve" (Foltos, 2013, p. 3). According to Jim Knight (2011), coaching works best when it is based on a partnership philosophy that embraces the following principles:

- **Equality:** where the coaching relationship is recognized as a partnership of equals. Coaches do not see themselves as the 'expert,' but value the thoughts and beliefs of their coaching partner.
- **Choice:** where one person does not make decisions for another. To be effective, coaches allow their partner to determine the direction for coaching; the coaching partner usually knows better than anyone the area(s) in which she needs to improve.
- **Voice:** where everyone has an opportunity to express her point of view. Coaches encourage their partner to say what they think and feel without judgment. They listen to learn more than to persuade.
- **Reflection:** where both partners are 'truly thinking together.' Coaches offer suggestions to their partners and ask them 'What do you think?' To be truly reflective, ideas are open to adoption or rejection. Ideas for practice or change are sparked through this process of reflection.
- **Dialogue:** where both partners participate in ongoing conversation. Coaches do not lecture; rather, they enter the dialogue with openness and ask questions that provoke introspection (for example, "What were you feeling at the time?"). They listen more than they tell.
- **Praxis:** where the application of learning happens. Through the process of thoughtful and careful planning, the coach helps facilitate change in her partner's teaching practice. Meaningful and ongoing support is offered as the practical implications

of new learning are considered and, if necessary, amended.

- **Reciprocity:** where a genuine and respectful learning partnership emerges. Learning is not something that happens to the coaching partner. Everyone is rewarded. Both coach and coaching partner benefit from the experience; they are prepared to learn and grow together.

To begin her coaching journey, Janice met with her classroom teacher during nap time to review an upcoming lesson plan. The teacher described the activities and explained how they promote children's learning and development. Janice was invited to ask questions or give ideas. She was encouraged to choose one activity that she would lead from the lesson plan. Janice elected to read a story during meeting time. The teacher highlighted the selected activity. She briefly explained that the goal of this particular story was to introduce children to information and vocabulary related to the 'Where We Live' topic they were exploring.

Coaching in Action

During nap time, the teacher met with Janice to review and reflect on her performance. She began by asking her to summarize, or describe what happened. Janice shared that she read the story, *Little Elliot, Big City* during meeting time to a group of 16 four-year-old children. The teacher then asked Janice to share how she felt during the activity. Janice thought for a moment and revealed that she was very nervous at the beginning, but she relaxed when she saw how engaged most of the children were. By the end, she was almost enjoying it. Janice did, however, ask for assistance on how to handle children's comments during story time.

With Knight's partnership principles in mind, and working on the premise that small changes lead to continuous improvement (Foltos, 2013), teachers coach assistants in real time by:

- **including the assistant in curriculum planning.** The teacher sets time aside each week (for example, during nap or rest time) to meet with the classroom assistant and review the upcoming lesson or activity plan. This collaborative exercise nurtures a partnership of trust and initiates conversation around the planned activities that support children's learning and development. Teachers offer the assistant an opportunity to ask questions, make suggestions, or provide feedback on the material presented.
- **inviting the assistant to select one activity from the lesson plan per week to observe or lead.** The teacher recognizes that the assistant knows best what his comfort level and specific areas of difficulty are. Therefore, the assistant is encouraged to select the activity to observe or present. If the assistant is reluctant to choose, the teacher provides guidance by asking her to identify an area of teaching practice she would like to enhance. It is important for the teacher to note that, especially in the beginning phase of the coaching process, some assistants are likely to feel most comfortable observing the teacher in action. During debriefing sessions where dialogue, reflection, and reciprocity are modeled, the self-efficacy of the assistant often increases. Within this relationship of trust and respect, the assistant moves from observing to leading activities.
- **meeting with the assistant in advance of the lesson or activity to discuss the teaching and learning goal(s).** According to Knight (2011), the coach's goal is to "...distill the most important aspects of a teaching

practice, create simple explanations, and then share those explanations...” (p. 112). For example, the assistant might elect to read a story during morning meeting time. The coaching teacher explains the goal of story time and what action(s) are needed to ensure that story time is an effective learning tool for children. The coach is mindful of the partnership principles and checks to see if the assistant would like to adapt the practice in some way.

■ **modeling for or observing the assistant lead the activity.** After explaining the goal of the selected activity, the teacher as coach either models the activity or observes the assistant in action. If modeling is the preferred choice, the assistant records in writing her thoughts about the activity or lesson observed. If observation is chosen, the teacher documents what happened throughout the activity making particular note of the children’s responses: what they are doing, saying, and/or learning. According to Foltos (2013), “Classroom observations need not last for hours. Many effective observations are completed in less than 30 minutes, some far less” (p. 160).

■ **meeting with the assistant to debrief observations.** As soon as possible after the observation, the teacher and assistant meet. Teachers use a range of semi-structured questions to encourage assistants to identify, reveal, and explore their own practices and underlying beliefs. Through reflective practice they are better able to realize the need for change and/or improvement in their teaching. Effectively, assistants become agents for their own change. The teacher is available to share the ‘tools of the trade’ during this period of dialogue, but is sensitive to the fact that the assistant can accept or reject ideas.

Based on their debriefing, the teacher and assistant created an action plan that included setting a time for Janice to observe a story time with a focus on how to manage children’s contributions. They also participated in an online webinar on the topic of Dialogic Reading — something they would both benefit from. Janice agreed to read another story the next week. During her debriefing with the teacher, she shared how much more confident she felt and, as a consequence, how much more engaged the children were. She felt that she would like to continue to lead a group story time once or twice each week. She also felt that she was ready to lead another type of activity — perhaps an entire meeting time!

Supporting our ‘Unsung Heroes’

The success of the ‘teacher as coach’ model rests on creating the type of strength-based supportive relationship between the teacher and assistant that nurtures the growth and development of both. It is not inevitable that both parties will create this relationship just because they know the value of it. For the teacher, taking time to coach the assistant may involve relinquishing some control over what takes place in the classroom and trusting that greater results are achieved when everyone works together. However, when trained on the approach (and training is essential to the success of the model), teachers understand the importance of investing time in nurturing the professional growth of the classroom assistant. Over time, they see firsthand the return on their investment.

Teacher assistants could be described as the unsung heroes of education. They are expected to play many roles throughout the day as they support children’s learning and development. The reality for many assistants, however, is that they are only as effective as the classroom teacher allows them to be. Studies support the contention that job-embedded coaching in real time offers the type of continual support that ensures newly acquired skills and knowledge are consistently applied in the classroom. Coaching in real time offers the opportunity to improve the classroom experiences of children by strengthening the skills of teacher assistants. When teacher assistants are

valued, trained, and supported, they are poised to reach their full potential.

References

- Foltos, L. (2013). *Peer coaching: Unlocking the power of collaboration*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Gawande, A. (2011, October 3). “Personal best: Top athletes and singers have coaches. Should You?” *The New Yorker*. Retrieved December 13, 2014: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/03/personal-best
- Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum.
- Knight, J. (2011). *Unmistakable impact: A partnership approach for dramatically improving instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Levine, A. (2006). “Educating school teachers.” The Education Schools Project. www.edschools.org/teacher_report.htm
- Lloyd, C. M., & Bangser, M. (2009). *Promoting preschool quality through effective classroom management: Implementation lessons from the Foundations of Learning demonstration*. New York: MDRC.