Pushing Social-Emotional RTI Practices into the Classroom: The Coaching Model

Teaching can be a lonely profession. The instructor typically closes the classroom door and delivers a lesson, receiving little or no direct feedback about the effectiveness of their instruction or behavior management. But teachers have an ally in their quest to learn new and effective ways to manage behaviors and promote a positive, optimistic learning environment: the classroom coach. Coaching can be defined as a role "in which an individual provides another with direction and support to accomplish their goals" (Hershfeldt et al., 2012; p. 282). The teacher selects the coaching goals; the coach contributes guidance and expert knowledge.

One of the key means for schools to push effective RTI practices out into classrooms is through the use of the coaching model. A wide array of instructional, support, and administrative staff may find themselves pressed into service as coaches. This article offers advice to coaches on how to engage and motivate teachers to be full partners in a coaching relationship. It also provides a general structure for organizing coaching meetings and includes suggestions for reaching the 'reluctant' teacher.

Coaching: Laying the Foundation. While coaching can be a highly productive and cost-effective method to deploy social-emotional RTI techniques in the classroom, coaches should take care at the outset to lay a strong foundation based on mutual trust and communication on which to build teacher relationships. Here are 3 non-negotiable assumptions that support effective coaching (Hershfeldt et al., 2012).

1. The teacher and coach are equals. The teacher is a trained educator with primary responsibility for managing the learning and behaviors of an entire class. The coach may bring expert knowledge in specific areas such as instructional or behavior-management techniques. Teacher and coach work as co-equals to find answers that address the social-emotional needs and behaviors of particular groups and individuals.

2. The goal of coaching is to find solutions. The coach avoids the simplistic trap of framing a behavioral challenge as the result of teacher or student deficits--because such an attitude is one-sided and can stifle creative thinking. The coach instead embraces the optimistic view that there are strengths and resources to be found within the teacher, the student(s), and the learning environment that can be assembled into an effective RTI plan. The relentless focus of coaching is for the teacher, student(s), and coach to build and master skills that promote positive learning and behavioral outcomes.

3. Coaching communication is confidential. The coach makes clear to the teacher that their conversations are confidential. If the principal or other administrator has requested regular updates about the coaching process, the coach and teacher negotiate the content of those updates. For example, teacher and coach may agree that communication with the administrator will consist of the written documentation that comes out of the coaching meetings. Or at the end of each coaching session, coach and teacher may jointly decide on the main points from the meeting that the coach is to communicate to the administrator.

Coaching: Structuring the Meeting. RTI coaching meetings can cover a wide variety of topics. The teacher and coach might talk about how to set up effective classroom management systems, for example, or the coach may present the results of a classroom observation that includes data on observed rates of teacher praise. However varied they may be in content, all coaching meetings should follow a predictable format that ensures productive, goal-centered discussion. At a minimum, the coach and teacher should start the meeting by agreeing on a general goal to
achieve during the session. If the meeting is to focus on planning an ambitious task (e.g., to revise class rules and provide student training), the teacher and coach can next break that larger task into more management sub-tasks. The rest of the meeting would then be devoted to creating a detailed implementation plan. If instead the meeting is to move across several related topics (e.g., the coach will present observational data on teacher use of process praise; the coach and teacher will plan how to improve the frequency of praise delivery; etc.), coach and teacher would develop a meeting agenda to ensure that all topics are discussed and allowing adequate time for each.

It is also recommended that the coach and teacher produce written documentation of each coaching meeting. Such documentation demonstrates effective use of meeting time; helps participants to remember what they discussed, accomplished, and agreed upon; and provides valuable evidence of RTI implementation at the classroom level. As mentioned earlier, the teacher should have input into how the meeting documentation is worded to ensure that they are comfortable with it—as such documentation might eventually be read by school administration and other RTI stakeholders. NOTE: See the document RTI Classroom Collaboration: Session Organizer for an example of a streamlined generic form suitable to document coaching meetings.

**Coaching: Providing Supportive Feedback.** As mentioned earlier, the coach that project a 'strength-based' model of teacher assistance through words and actions is more likely to motivate instructors to make positive changes to their classroom practices. Coaches can encounter a potential roadblock to teacher motivation, however, when they must deliver constructive feedback targeting how that instructor can improve performance. For example, a coach who notes low rates of teacher praise during a large-group lesson will want to find a way to share this feedback that does not discourage the instructor or put them on the defensive.

A useful strategy when delivering potentially threatening feedback is to open with 'process praise' describing teachers' observed strengths, followed immediately by the constructive feedback (Hershfeldt et al., 2012). For example, the coach who shares data about the teacher's limited use of classroom praise might open with a praise statement of their own: "I noted that you praised students at several points during the lesson. Each time, your praise was timely and drew the student's attention to their own effective strategies. Nice work!" The coach can then follow up with the constructive feedback: "During the 30 minutes that I observed your lesson, I counted 5 examples of praise. Research says that a good rule of thumb is to aim for at least 6 praise statements every 15 minutes. So... the quality of praise that you're using is definitely there...we'll just want to brainstorm ideas to increase its frequency."

**Coaching and Social-Emotional RTI: Engaging the Reluctant Teacher.** There are good reasons that teachers may be reluctant to change or expand their classroom practices, even if the ultimate goal is to provide stronger behavioral or social-emotional support to students. The coach can often detect signs of reluctance in the first conversations with a teacher. If such signs appear, the coach will want to probe a bit to uncover—if possible—the particular explanation(s) driving that educator's apparent lack of motivation.

Most frequently, instructors cite lack of time as the reason for their reluctance. The coach should respond honestly to the teacher who is concerned about finding sufficient time to implement RTI practices; initially at least, this effort probably will take up more time. However, as classroom management improves and the instructor is able more effectively to motivate struggling learners, that teacher should typically see a decline in classroom disruption and an corresponding increase in available instructional time.

A core tenet of social-emotional RTI is that schools should teach and reinforce expected behaviors just as they teach and reinforce academic skills (Newton et al., 2012). Teachers who are used to a more punitive approach to behavior management may be reluctant to transition to an alternative, positive behavioral intervention approach represented
by RTI. The remainder of this article presents several reasons that instructors may cling to the use of punishments such as classroom removal and ideas to persuade them to adopt a more student-centered RTI approach.

**Problem:** The teacher is comfortable with current disciplinary procedures and does not see a compelling need to change (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Whenever people (including teachers) are asked to change their professional behavior, there is a tendency to cling to known and comfortable routines. This reluctance to give up the familiar and embrace change is universal—and is known as the 'status quo' bias.

**Solution:** The teacher accepts the need to move beyond the 'status quo'. The status-quo bias is a kind of behavioral inertia that can prevent teachers from making the effort to master more effective behavior-management techniques. The solution is for the coach to create a positive pressure that prompts the teacher to move beyond the comfort zone and adopt new practices. Data can play a key role in effecting this shift in mindset: for example, a teacher may suddenly feel less comfortable with current classroom management practices when provided data showing a classroom's poor academic performance or high rates of office referrals in comparison with other classrooms.

**Problem:** Defiant students control teacher behavior (Conroy et al., 2009). Teachers must respond to students who refuse to comply with, or even openly defy, their directives. However, instructors may lack flexibility in choosing a disciplinary response that best matches the situation—instead simply removing the uncooperative learner from the classroom. In this scenario, students who want to escape work can exercise control over teacher behavior by acting out on repeated occasions to engineer their own removal from the academic setting.

**Solution:** Teachers learn to recognize student coercion and regain control. The coach's task is to train teachers to recognize when confrontations appear to be initiated and controlled by the student. The teacher can then take back control through a reflective process of analyzing student behavior problems clearly and linking those problems to likely underlying reasons or 'functions' (e.g., escape/avoidance of academic work). This reflection allows the teacher to respond in an individualized manner that will both teach and reinforce expected behaviors and, where necessary, provide the student with alternative, appropriate ways to attain their goals (e.g., teaching the student to temporarily escape work by asking for a brief break rather than disrupting the classroom).

**Problem:** The teacher is reinforced for classroom removals (Maag, 2012). When an acting-out or otherwise uncooperative student is removed from the classroom, the teacher can experience immediate reinforcement ('negative reinforcement') at the termination of the confrontation. Yet the instructor often will not be aware that reinforcement has occurred. When a classroom removal results in teacher reinforcement and such reinforcement fails to rise to consciousness, conditions are primed for these removals to continue. This is because behaviors followed by reinforcing consequences are 'rewarded' and are thus more likely to persist or even increase.

**Solution:** The teacher recognizes negative reinforcement and takes counter-measures. Using data on office referrals or other behavioral information, the coach helps the teacher to identify patterns of repeated student removal and to select alternative responses for continued misbehavior.

**Problem:** The teacher sees that punishment works--for most students (Maag, 2001). One reason that teachers may habitually use punitive approaches such as classroom removal is that they work for many students! In a typical student population, sending a student to the principal's office is quite effective for the 95% who show few behavior problems. However, the same disciplinary response is ineffective with 5% of students, who either don’t care or wish to escape the classroom. Yet the teacher may assume that these recalcitrant students simply need more of the same punishment for it to be effective--so problem interactions intensify.
Solution: The teacher recognizes that punishment can be counterproductive. The coach reminds the teacher that, while punishment practices may ‘work’ for most students, there is a small but significant sub-group whose problem behaviors may become worse—not better—when addressed with classroom removal or other punishments. And this sub-group often generates the majority of office referrals! The coach also provides the teacher with a range of alternative approaches that can eliminate the need to use punishing or aversive consequences—such as use of positive antecedent strategies to head off problem behaviors.

References


RTI Classroom Collaboration: Session Organizer

Persons Attending: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Directions: Use this form to document collaborative work sessions between classroom teacher(s) and RTI consultant(s) or coach(es).

Goal: Describe what you plan to accomplish in this session:

Meeting Plan: Use the table below to organize and document your meeting. For example, you can list agenda items to discuss, break an ambitious goal into a series of more manageable sub-tasks, etc.

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Discussion/Notes: Record any additional important discussion or 'process notes' from the meeting.

Date of Next Meeting: Select a date/time/location when you will meet again.