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Nurturing the Learning Zone: Moving Toward Hope and Possibility while Coaching through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dana VanderLugt

Hudsonville Public Schools, dvanderl@hpseagles.net

Kathy Levandoski

Hudsonville Public Schools, klevando@hpseagles.net

Erica R. Hamilton

Grand Valley State University, hamilter@gvsu.edu

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Nurturing the Learning Zone: Moving Toward Hope and Possibility while Coaching through the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Dana VanderLugt, Kathy Levandoski, and Erica R. Hamilton



Dana VanderLugt



Kathy Levandoski



Erica R. Hamilton

For many PK-12 educators and administrators, the past two and half years have been hard. *Really hard.* The COVID-19 pandemic has been incredibly challenging, on so many fronts. Although we've entered another school year, which holds new promise, many of us are still processing and managing the pandemic's ripple effects. To use Brown's (2021) phrase, many of us remain "blown"—as in exhausted, overly stressed, and overwhelmed.

If someone had asked us before the global COVID-19 pandemic what we were doing to foster hope and encourage possibility in our work with K-12 teachers, we would have likely shared how each of us, in our various K-12 and higher education roles, has used cognitive and instructional coaching to support teacher growth and student learning. Now, more than two and half years since the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic, although we would still answer this question the same, we'd also explain some key differences between our experiences with pre-pandemic coaching and the work we now find ourselves doing and how that learning informs our work moving forward.

Integrating Cognitive Coaching and Instructional Coaching

It has been said that effective teaching often looks like cultivating the space and skills to learn, and then getting out of the way. The same can be said for effective coaching: if our intention is to maintain and support teachers for the purpose of ensuring student growth, then a coach is intended to be a vehicle for, not a driver of, increasing teacher effectiveness.

Our training and experience is rooted in Costa and Garmston's (2019) Cognitive Coaching. This model focuses on self-directedness and is a "nonjudgmental process of mediation," not intended to necessarily change humans' behaviors but, rather, to attend to their internal thought processes. Instead of acting as collaborator, consultant, or evaluator, Cognitive Coaching puts the coach firmly in the role as a mediator of thinking. In a K-12 setting, a Cognitive Coach invites teachers to analyze a problem and develop their own tools and strategies to solve that problem. Within this model, rather than becoming dependent on the coach, the goal is for teachers to become increasingly empowered and self-directed, making them more likely to apply

their new pathways of thinking to other situations and students they encounter.

And yet, while we understand and have seen the power of Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2019), pre-pandemic we often found ourselves defaulting to an ambulatory mode of coaching (Brown & L'Allier, 2020). In this mode, we found ourselves often side-tracked by the urgency of day-to-day concerns, rather than living into our intentions of prioritizing initiatives around coaching cycles and learning labs. According to Brown and L'Allier (2020), when coaches do not live out their values through the use of their time, they may feel short-term success, but, overall, they lose the impact of their work and ultimately sacrifice long-term teacher and student growth.

For example, a study of coaches working with Reading First grants revealed that assigned coaches spent, on average, only 28% of their time working with teachers (L'Allier, Elish-Piper, Bean, 2010). This statistic is further complicated when we examine earlier research by Yoon, et al. (2007) and Desimone (2009) who suggest that it takes fourteen to twenty hours of teachers' professional learning to make a real, long-term impact on their instructional practice. This means that as coaches we must actively prioritize the meaningful, collaborative work that happens alongside and directly with teachers. Even though we knew this, in the busyness of serving teachers and their students alongside district and other professional demands, it was sometimes hard to ensure that our time and our values aligned in our coaching work. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Shift from the Performance Zone to the Learning Zone

In his TED Talk, "How to Get Better at the Things You Care About," Briceño (2016) lays out the concept of the "Performance Zone" versus the "Learning Zone." Briceño explains the frustration many of us feel when we don't see improvement in an area of our lives we care about, whether in work, personal relationships, or hobbies. The problem, Briceño says, is that we spend too much of our time in the performance zone, namely the high-stakes environment of execution where

mistakes are avoided and mastery is required, and not enough of our time in the learning zone, which is a "low-stakes island" where mistakes are a gateway to growth, pausing to practice is expected, and vulnerability is a given.

For many educators, teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic created an extended, never-ending performance zone. Constant laments about learning loss and "catching kids up," coupled with COVID-19 precautions and the reality of supporting quarantined students has been exhausting and overwhelming. This, in part, has led to that "blown" reality Brown (2021) describes. And yet, this permanent occupancy inside the performance zone isn't just tiring, it's unsustainable. We would never expect athletes to solely perform, neglecting opportunities between contests to practice, reflect, and rest. And yet, that's what is expected of educators.

Our shift as coaches working during a COVID-19 pandemic has been to actively find and creatively seek ways to create "low-stakes islands" for teachers, namely intentional opportunities to leave the stress of the performance zone to reflect, admit struggle, take a breath, and remember their "why" for teaching. In doing this work, we've been able to move away from some of the pitfalls of ambulatory coaching (Brown & L'Allier, 2020). Moreover, we've continued to draw on tenets of Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2019) to ensure that we remain engaged in meaningful, teacher- and learner-centered coaching. To show what this looks like in practice, in the following section we share three low-stakes island approaches Dana and Kathy have implemented. This work has resulted in intentional and do-able coaching opportunities for K-12 teachers to spend more time in the learning zone (Briceño, 2016).

Low-Stakes Island #1: Any-Way-We-Can-Make-It-Happen Observations

We have long found DeFrance, Broadwell, and McDougall's (2016) learning lab model, namely classroom observations embedded with intentional group reflection before and after the visit, to be one of the

most effective forms of teacher professional learning. Valued by teachers for its practical implications and collaborative nature, learning labs have been a focus and a priority of our coaching work for several years. And yet, they have been almost impossible to facilitate since March of 2020, due to COVID-19 protocols, the substitute teacher shortage, and the inherent challenges associated with student and staff absences due to illness and quarantines. Thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, any professional development activity requiring pulling teachers from classrooms and hiring several substitute teachers continues to be canceled or postponed.

In our efforts to creatively problem-solve how to continue providing this important learning lab experience (DeFrance, Broadwell, & McDougall, 2016), we have continued to use the structure of a learning lab (i.e., goal setting, classroom observation, reflection time with the host teacher afterward), but now focus on one teacher at a time, with one coach subbing in the classroom and the other coach co-observing with the teacher. For example, Kathy partnered with a brand-new second grade teacher to co-observe a veteran in another building for one hour, while Dana played the role of substitute teacher. Then, Kathy facilitated a post-observation reflection and debrief with the brand-new second grade teacher during the teacher's planning period. Prior to this meeting, Kathy invited the host teacher to respond to questions generated during the observation.

Another time, Kathy subbed in a Kindergarten class while Dana accompanied a veteran who was new to that grade-level to co-observe the kindergarten class next door. In the midst of the observation, the teacher leaned over and shared with Dana, "This is just so energizing and helpful to *see* this instruction. I really needed to see this in-action." Without coaches to facilitate this work, these types of observations and intentional, facilitated debriefs wouldn't happen. Although literally a next-door colleague, the impact of that peer observation cannot be underestimated — this teacher needed the opportunity to spend time in their learning zone.

Low-Stakes Island #2: Feed-Them-And-They-Will-Come Lunch and Learns

Continuing to search for creative ways to provide opportunities for growth and conversation, Dana and Kathy also created "Lunch and Learns." We advertised these optional monthly learning opportunities via email and invited teachers to participate and minimized the stress of a working lunch by bringing in pizza or sandwiches, funded through our central administration's budget, directly to buildings during staff lunch hours.

During the 2021-22 school year, we both used this "Lunch and Learn" format to host book studies and thereby create organic opportunities for teachers to shift into their learning zones. Teachers were asked to prepare for these monthly sessions by reading a section of the book ahead of time. As coaches, we facilitated separate conversations between colleagues in their buildings to discuss what was read, including how these ideas connected to participants' pedagogy and practice. After spending time in their learning zones, teachers utilized the upcoming weeks to apply what they considered and discussed before coming back again to the next "Lunch and Learn" to further engage, reflect, and process.

Throughout the year, participants often mentioned how manageable it was to read one small chunk at a time in preparation for these meetings, generally one chapter each month. A bit of a surprise for us, as coaches, was the progression of a grassroots movement since starting these sessions. The original "Lunch and Learn" participants began talking about their learning with their colleagues, and, in turn, these colleagues asked to be included. What began as a low-stakes learning and coaching opportunity grew into multiple book studies that included teachers across the district. Even more exciting was that the students in these teachers' classrooms were also benefactors, thanks to the adjusted instruction and renewed energy of their teachers. As a result of its success so far, this pandemic-inspired practice is one we plan to continue to utilize moving forward. This model also demonstrates how coaching supports teachers' empowerment and self-direction.

Low-Stakes Island #3: Meet- Them-Where-They're-At Coaching Conversations

While coaching cycles and coaching conversations (Brown & L'Allier, 2020) are not a new practice, the nature of these conversations needed to be adjusted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These conversations looked and sounded different when many teachers were struggling with varied instructional modalities and meeting students' increased needs. In some cases, teachers were trying to navigate additional personal challenges while others were questioning whether or not to stay in the profession. The past two and a half years have made clear that coaching conversations need to be centered on supporting teachers, wherever they're at.

For example, when a teacher asked Dana to meet in order to discuss the design of a new elective, she found herself also coaching and walking alongside this teacher, who was a new mom, as she struggled to navigate the complications of sick days and sick kids. Addressing and supporting this teacher's immediate need related to childcare and challenges associated with illness were an important component of this coaching experience. It would have been futile to invite this teacher into a learning zone without first acknowledging and showing empathy for the stickiness of her current reality.

Another example of intentionally meeting teachers where they're at was evident in Kathy's coaching collaboration this past year with a first-year Kindergarten teacher. Pre-pandemic, Kathy's conversations with this teacher would've likely centered on supporting this teacher's learning zone by facilitating conversations related to explorations of grade-level scope-and-sequence as well as curricular expectations. However, it became clear in initial conversations that this beginning teacher was dealing with a revolving door of absent learners while also managing some of her own health challenges. As a result, Kathy decided that the best way to create a learning zone-centered coaching relationship was to identify and start with this teacher's most immediate concerns.

First, for Kathy, it was important to acknowledge that this was an especially tricky situation. As a result,

rather than traditional professional development, what was most helpful for this new teacher was focusing on human connection. This included providing modeling of lessons and ensuring that this teacher had an opportunity to observe a veteran. Had Kathy started by piling on new information, it would have overwhelmed this teacher more — what she needed was someone to come alongside her, acknowledge the difficulties, and provide tangible examples connected to practical applications.

Using our instructional and Cognitive Coaching skills, and leaning in as listeners committed to our colleagues' well-being, these conversations weren't necessarily advice-giving conversations or embedded with temporary tricks used by a motivational speaker. Rather, Kathy and Dana intentionally chose to first listen to teachers, while also naming and acknowledging their current situations. When this happened, we were more likely to build pathways toward greater resilience and endurance as we invited teachers to shift from their performance zones to learning zones.

Cultivating Hope and Possibility Through Low-Stakes Islands

In each of these examples, Dana and Kathy intentionally created a "low-stakes island" (Briceño, 2016) coaching experience that offered teachers opportunities to move from their performance zones to their learning zones. When this happens, teachers are invited into spaces of hope and possibility, so what they do and how they think expands beyond the present moments. Although some of these experiences were revised or redesigned as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, each practice and approach remained centered on teachers' learning and growth as well as their students' learning and development.

As we move beyond this global COVID-19 pandemic, we see a value in continuing to invite teachers into their learning zones. To do so, we must embed our instructional coaching with low-stakes islands where mistakes are okay, pausing to reconsider practice is expected, and vulnerability is a norm. While these ideas and suggestions may need to be adjusted based on individual coaches' contexts and teachers' needs, the

goal of implementing low-stakes islands as part of one's instructional coaching repertoire is centered on creating and sustaining intentional opportunities for teachers to spend time in their learning zones.

Where We Go from Here

The COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions have forced many K-12 teachers to operate in survival mode. As a result, they have not had the capacity or time to dive into pedagogical books, participate in sustained learning labs, or engage in data dialogues without first naming and discussing stresses and worries. That said, these initial conversations about teachers' immediate needs and concerns can serve as initial connection points which can then lead to a foundation for instructionally-based, pedagogically-focused coaching conversations and relationships. Just like students who need breakfast before they start their school day, a teacher is less likely to be able to discuss, for instance, their methods of gradual release until first acknowledging the immediate and pressing realities they're experiencing and grappling with, whatever those may be. After all, teachers are humans first and educators second.

Born out of our own experiences and reflective of a collective desire to see K-12 teachers and their students thrive, moving forward we see great promise in the use of low-stakes islands as an integral part of an instructional coach's repertoire. As we think about where we go from here, an important resource we see aligned with our commitment to coaching excellence is Aguilar's (2018) book, *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators*. Though published pre-pandemic, Aguilar provides a guidebook and specific steps that have encouraged us to embed low-stakes islands in our work as instructional coaches and educators. In her introduction, she writes, "In the majority of schools, what's needed isn't more professional development on deconstructing standards or academic discourse or using data to drive instruction. What's needed is time, space, and attention to managing stress and cultivating resilience" (p. 5). Like Aguilar, we have found that low-stakes islands invite teachers into their learning zones which then affords space to hold still, reflect, return to the "why," and set intentions around mindsets and

actions. These intentional actions serve as gateways to creating deeper, long-term coaching relationships as we partner with teachers to move toward greater hope and new possibilities.

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Author Biographies

Dana VanderLugt works as an instructional coach in Hudsonville Public Schools. A former middle school English Language Arts teacher and college writing instructor, Dana also gives back to the K-12 profession through field supervision of Hope College student teachers. She can be found at www.danavanderlugt.com and reached by email at <dvanderl@hpseagles.net>.

Kathy Levandoski is a Professional Development and Instructional Coach in the Hudsonville Public Schools. In addition, she has had the honor to work with graduate candidates as an adjunct professor at Grand Valley State University. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with family, reading on the beach, and continuing her learning journey. She can be reached at <klevando@hpseagles.net>.

Erica R. Hamilton is an Associate Professor of Education at Grand Valley State University, where she works with preservice and inservice teachers. Her research interests focus on teacher learning and professional development, place-based education, literacy, and educational technology. She can be reached at <hamilton@gvsu.edu>.

