

Filling a Leadership Vacuum

by Joanna Michelson

One by one, the 25 high school teachers wander in and start posting their “What Learning Looks and Sounds Like in My Classroom” charts. My pulse rate doubles. Is this meeting I am about to lead going to be a waste of time? Have I misread this situation? The teachers’ charts suggest they are more on the same page about teaching and learning than I thought. According to their posters, this seems like an ideal school for the literacy reform. Do these teachers really need to change? Have I underestimated their school culture?

As a district literacy coach, I work with several of the school’s English teachers, supporting them through one-on-one, classroom-based coaching sessions, often with many other teachers, consultants and administrators present. This “residency” model of embedded professional development is designed to build several strong laboratory classrooms in the district, in which other educators can easily observe teacher practice and learning alongside student learning. The residency teachers at this site have been enthusiastically involved in the work for two years; their practices have become increasingly student centered, with more students achieving at high levels.

This spring, however, I have begun to notice a change. The residency teachers ignore the e-mails I send to schedule coaching dates. When I manage to contact them, I have a very hard time coordinating visits to their classrooms because they say they’re too busy. During my few successful visits, I sense that teachers no longer want my feedback. And more and more students in these previously high-functioning classes are visibly opting out of learning, without consequence. It seems the teachers are less committed, sharing a feeling that one teacher voices: “Haven’t we done enough to change our practices? What about the rest of the school? I can’t work any harder.”

In desperation, I seek Principal John Henderson’s support. Uninvolved in the reform work this year, John is becoming increasingly difficult to locate. When I finally catch up with

him in the hall, he seems like he’s in a rush. “Do you have a minute?” I call out eagerly.

“Just a minute,” he replies, checking his watch.

“Will you support a visit to another school in the district?” I ask nervously. “The residency teachers really seem like they’re burning out, and I want to show them that there’s room for more growth for them and their students!”

While John quickly agrees to the visit, he declines to come along or facilitate any follow-up. “Can you ask the district for substitute money?” he calls over his shoulder as he heads to his office.

The trip is a great success. The residency teachers are inspired by the other school. They are most struck by the schoolwide emphasis on student voice and the clear, shared school vision led by the principal. They also are convinced that the rest of the school must support the values they are cultivating in their residency. Eager to engage staff in a process to unite them in sharing a vision of effective instruction, they want me to facilitate the discussion. Of course, I will do anything to move the literacy reform forward and honor these teachers who feel so isolated.

So here I am, a literacy coach, running a staff meeting. As requested, teachers have made posters of various sizes and shapes that express the values of the student-centered literacy reform. All charts mention ideas like “students are talking,” “students are working independently,” “students know how to work collaboratively,” “students are advocating for their own needs.” Perhaps the other teachers really do share the residency teachers’ hopes and expectations for students. But if this is true, why has the reform stagnated?

As teachers start settling into their chairs, the door swings open, and John walks in. He smiles at me and takes his seat with the staff, producing his best principal poker face. Several

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teachers start whispering. This is the first meeting John has attended in a while. I wonder if the teachers are sharing my thoughts: What does he want for the students at this school? And where has he been all year? My doubts about facilitating this meeting intensify.

Ted and Susie, two of the residency teachers, introduce me to the staff, and after sharing the highlights of their visit, they note that the other school's classrooms felt truly consistent and student-centered. Susie adds, "We can't move forward as a school unless we have this discussion about our visions for our students in *all* our classrooms."

"Thank you for agreeing to initiate a difficult conversation today," I begin, pausing to point at the posters. "Judging by these wall charts you have prepared, you are already thinking about ideal conditions for student learning, and you want these conditions to be a reality for all of your students. Our conversation today will shift between the theoretical and the concrete — the larger guiding principles you value and the nitty-gritty of what those principles look like in practice. In my experience, we cannot have one without the other. And we can't hold each other accountable without both the general and the specific."

Mark raises his hand. "I take issue with the word 'accountable.' That feels entirely negative to me. Is this about punishing each other for messing up?"

There is a rumble in the group. I glance at Ted, and he shrugs. I respond, "OK. The idea is that we can't work in isolation. Accountability, in my mind, means we are aware of what each other believes and is trying out. ..." Silently critiquing my words as I speak, I cringe. Why am I using the term "we" when I am not a teacher in this school? Why am I running

this conversation? Why doesn't John speak up? He's the principal, and he should be leading this.

Mark seems to accept my response, at least superficially. But he has cracked the veneer of the meeting. Whispers continue between tablemates, and I become more anxious. This conversation will be awkward, and its implications will be uncomfortable. I glance at John. He shuffles the handouts on the table in front of him. It is clear I am on my own in leading this conversation. It's no surprise that students at this school are reluctant to work collaboratively or take risks. John models isolation and does not seem to support risk-taking. Why should students expect to be held accountable or to have high expectations for each other? They see their teachers resist public accountability, too.

I return to my opening, explain the agenda for the day and provide a rationale for each part — professional reading, discussion of individual core values, gallery walk, discussion of shared core values and inter-visitation schedule.

Sandy, a special education teacher, cuts in: "Personally, I am not comfortable with anyone visiting my classroom. You have to acknowledge," she looks up at me, "that not all of us have had the coaching that the residency teachers have had. And, keep in mind, any time anyone visits, it is just one moment in time, one moment in the curriculum, one moment that might not represent all the other moments. Plus, I've been pulled out of my room for other duties all year. ..."

I am floored. We have not even started the agenda, and the very last part of it is already generating the most anxiety. I expected some balking around figuring out shared values. Yet it seems the most terrifying component is the fear of being

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exposed in the classroom. This staff throws parties together and goes rock climbing on the weekends. Yet they clearly do not trust each other as professionals.

I gather my teacher voice. "OK. I hear the concerns about the intervisitations. We will have time to address those issues later." The residency teachers are quiet. I can see in their faces that, on some level, they anticipated this; the staffwide resistance has been their reality all year.

Hmm. So this is one reason the residency teachers have grown subtly resistant. Over time, they have gotten burned out by the pressure to move their practices further than those of the rest of the staff and are tired of the public nature of their learning. What happens to a group of teachers who receive substantially more professional development support than the rest of the staff? What if that professional development conflicts with the school's existing "closed door" norms? In this case, without a principal's voice to focus the school's vision, the strong residency teachers have gotten reabsorbed into the school's culture of distrust. Suddenly, I have even more respect for their desire to initiate this meeting. They want to address it, but as I sit there quietly, I feel the burden sitting even more precariously on my shoulders.

Against all odds, however, the meeting slowly begins to gain momentum. To my amazement, when I engage the group in a discussion of shared practices and personal core beliefs about teaching and learning, everyone actively participates. No one argues about the process, and Sandy and Mark volunteer to synthesize the patterns they notice and read them out to the group while I write them on an overhead. When I look up from the projector, however, my heart sinks. John has left. Was he threatened by this conversation? Does he honestly not care?

Puzzled, I pull out the chart I have designed to organize and schedule intervisitations. As I tape the chart to the board and start to introduce the schedule with a possible protocol for observation, Mark interrupts, "Again, I am not comfortable with this idea of accountability and visits."

This spark ignites other voices. "I don't feel we have enough time to plan this right now." "Whether or not we admit it, there are power dynamics at play in this room." "Will we ask first? How much notice do we give?" "I don't know what we are looking for ... and how will the debrief work?" "What if we only offer positive feedback first?" "What about first-year teachers? Can we be excused?"

I don't know how to respond to this snarled web of worries and fears. This meeting reminds me why I am not — and do not want to be — an administrator. Still, it would be helpful to be able to *mandate* something. Without John present, this process has no teeth.

We have to stop at noon. "Why don't you work out your schedules over lunch?" I suggest, wondering if I should quickly track down John and try to enlist his help. The group half-heartedly invites me to the potluck luncheon. I decline, and as I head away to my office, I'm haunted by where this all went wrong. I thought this conversation was essential to the coaching, and the residency teachers certainly wanted me to help, but what will happen to the coaching now? How could a group so seemingly on the same page have this level of distrust? Did I just make the situation worse for the residency teachers? Maybe I should stop my work at this school. But if I stop trying to improve the school culture — and students' learning — who will take over? Who's in charge here? Can teachers reform a school without the principal's support?

Case 7

Questions for discussion

- 1) How can professional learning experiences of a small group (e.g., language arts teachers) be used to change the culture of a whole school? Can it be done without strong principal leadership?
- 2) Where did this coach's process fall apart and why? How might this situation have been avoided?
- 3) How can an instructional coach help make it less threatening for teachers to make their practice public?