Coaching Teacher Dispositions

Research Summary

By: Alicia Wenzel, Jennifer Roberts

We know that educators who "value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them" are a key component to middle level students' success (AMLE, 2010, p. 15). Middle level teachers must have the appropriate knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to create an environment and learning opportunities that are responsive to the changing needs of young adolescents. This includes understanding middle level students' needs (physical, intellectual, social, moral/ethical, and emotional), knowing how to meet these needs, and believing that all middle level students can succeed (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; McEwin & Dickinson, 2012; McEwin, & Smith, 2013; Williams, 2012).

Intensive and ongoing support of dispositions focused on the classroom and the students, and provided by teachers who understand the particular needs of young adolescents, can extend teachers' abilities to reach and teach middle level learners (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Coaching, as a support mechanism, is well-suited for all teachers working in a middle level school, as it incorporates collaboration, interdisciplinary teaming, and advisory programs (AMLE, 2012). The purpose of this summary is to review the research related to coaching teacher dispositions most connected to practices that support young adolescent success.

Defining Teacher Dispositions

Dispositions are an individual's tendencies to believe and act in a particular manner. Previous terms used to name dispositions include temperament, character, beliefs, values, ethics, attitudes, qualities, and habits of mind (Dottin, 2010; Teven, 2007). Dispositions appeared as an aspect of teaching in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s (Carnegie, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986). Early interest in teacher dispositions focused on a person's demeanor, habits, integrity, honesty, and moral behavior (Goodlad, 1990). Recently, dispositions have become integral components of teacher preparation programs, professional teaching standards, and teacher evaluation in K-12 schools (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011; AMLE, 2012; CAEP, 2013). The Interstate Teacher Assessment Consortium's (InTASC) model core teaching standards state that "habits of professional action and moral commitments that underlie the performances play a key role in how teachers do, in fact, act in practice" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011, p. 6).

Teacher dispositions are more than just beliefs but rather the tendency for those beliefs to...
be put into practice in the classroom (Costa & Kalik, 2000). In TASC model standards suggest that dispositions “function as intermediaries between knowing something —content matter, process, skill—and a performance or identifiable behavior or set of behaviors” (Freeman, 2007, p. 126). Villegas (2007) states that teachers’ beliefs about students significantly impact expectations held for student learning and achievement. Further, these beliefs “lead teachers to treat students differently resulting in positive or negative performance, aspirations, and self-concepts” (Villegas, 2007, p. 374). Thus, it is crucial that particular middle level dispositions are cultivated in teacher candidates in their preparation programs, and that these dispositions are further refined during a teacher’s initial years.

The support and growth of middle level teachers must therefore have an explicit focus on the development of beliefs, or dispositions, that promote positive and effective teacher practices (Villegas, 2007). In a perfect world, one would hire a middle level educator fully prepared to help young adolescents succeed. However, many new teachers may have the basic knowledge and skills necessary, but, if these are unaccompanied by appropriate dispositions toward teaching, learning, and students, students may not achieve academic success (Marzano, 2007). Rushton, Morgan, and Richard (2007) state that educators who are intuitive, extroverted, and perceptive are more likely to be successful teachers and better problem-solvers. Providing systems and support mechanisms to help develop teacher dispositions well-aligned to the needs of young adolescents is therefore necessary for continued teacher and student success.

Dispositions of Outstanding Middle Level Educators

When considering the specific roles required of those who are committed to serving young adolescents, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly National Middle School Association (2010), recognized that teachers should be student advocates, role models, supporters of diversity, collaborators, and lifelong learners. Deeply connected to each of these roles are crucial dispositions about teaching, learning, and the role of the educator in today’s middle level settings as identified by AMLE (2010).

- As an advocate for young adolescents’ social, emotional, physical, and developmental needs, an effective educator must believe that all students can learn, that their role as a teacher is to promote their students’ best interests, and that these interests are indeed worthy of the effort.
- As a role model, an effective educator must take responsibility for promoting young adolescents’ growth and development at all times, both inside and outside the classroom.
- A teacher who supports diversity values all students’ contributions, values family input in the learning process, and seeks varied perspectives to promote student growth.
- An effective middle level educator who is a collaborator seeks out collegial interactions in order to grow as a professional, enhance practice, and support students’ learning. This should include modeling and promoting collaboration within his or her classroom.
- A lifelong learner embraces the challenge of continuous growth and change and has a habit of reflection that influences his or her practice.
These professional roles constitute primary differences in specialized middle-level teacher preparation programs as compared to preparation programs designed to prepare teachers of young children or older adolescents (AMLE, 2013). But what if a teacher does not possess strong dispositions that allow them to fulfill these roles? What if a teacher does not believe that collaboration is important or is unsure how to be a collaborative team player? What if a teacher does not believe it is important to advocate for or support the needs of all learners or does not know how? What if a teacher has beliefs in these areas but does not act upon them in their classrooms? Dispositions can develop through the use of intentional and individualized coaching (Bell, Grant, & Fisk-Moody, 2007).

**Purposeful Coaching**

Initial middle level teacher preparation is just the beginning of teacher growth and development to prepare educators to work with young adolescents. Professional learning must continue well into the induction years. With excellent training, only a few of us would be able to sustain and thrive in isolation. Coaching, a popular model for advancing professional knowledge, abilities, and dispositions, is described as, “intensive, differentiated support[s] to teachers so they are able to implement proven practices” (Knight, 2009, p. 30). Coaches can enable teachers to recognize and employ new or different practices and behaviors that are outside of the teacher’s “zone of proximal development” (Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011). For teachers to improve and become reflective, effective practitioners, opportunities for purposeful coaching should exist where the coach and teacher work collaboratively to ensure each has equal voice and control over the content and process and where both partners learn from the experience (Knight, 2009). For coaching to be effective, a robust and collaborative learning relationship must exist between instructional coach and teacher that includes trust, nurturing, productive conversations about specific teaching problems or strategies that focus on sustained growth, and ample time for change (Habegger & Hodanbosi, 2011).

The fundamental role of an instructional coach in education is to increase the instructional capacity of teachers so they can strengthen their abilities to engage students and impact student learning (Habegger & Hodanbosi, 2011). Coaches provide job-embedded, continuous training centered on specific classroom and school issues and practices aligned to state standards, curricula, and assessment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009).

It is worth considering, though, what else is necessary for coaching to be effective in making transformational changes. Coaching is not a quick-fix solution because it typically does not address simple problems. A crucial component to the success of the coach-teacher partnership is that a coach must understand how to work with adult learners (Gibson, 2005). “Learning how to coach effectively is likely to be at least as challenging and complex an endeavor as learning to teach is” (Gibson, 2005, p. 72). Effective coaching takes place over time and is often dependent on the quality of the coach. It therefore becomes important to consider who is selected as a coach as well as the coach’s background and understanding of how to work with adult learners. Coaching’s success also depends on resources to provide training to the coach and time for the coach and teacher to work together. Investing resources in coaching, schools and administrators...
increase the likelihood that teachers receiving coaching will meet professional goals, cultivate appropriate dispositions for working with young adolescents, and be better prepared to teach middle school students.

**Differentiated Coaching Practices**

Purposeful coaching includes differentiated coaching strategies, much like the practices teachers use to meet varied student needs in the classroom. These practices are based on the premise that support should match the desired outcome and the learner. Coaching practices should therefore be based on each teacher’s unique needs and that of his or her students (Diez, 2007). Coaches must also appreciate the differences each teacher brings to the partnership and classroom (Bean & DeFord, 2012). Effective coaching strategies focus on various purposes for learning, utilizing specific techniques and strategies based on the identified purpose. When selecting coaching strategies, the coach and teacher examine evidence to determine areas for focus, discuss the areas of shared responsibility, and negotiate the terms of their collaborative and collective capacity. These terms may include which techniques to use and by whom for the identified purpose, how to evaluate if chances to practice and attitudes are occurring, and what to do if chances are effective or ineffective (i.e., next steps).

**Providing Explicit Feedback**

Purposeful coaching includes clear and explicit feedback (Bean & Eisenberg, 2009; Simon, 2012). Diez (2007) argues that providing explicit feedback is one of the most powerful tools we can use to help teachers develop appropriate and desired dispositions. Giving feedback related to behaviors that are indicative of one’s dispositions, a skilled coach can help a teacher focus on what she does well and provide “guidance on what might be her next step to come closer to the full set of expectations for professional behavior” (p. 213). By making criteria for dispositions public and explicit, educators and administrators can provide language to the sometimes nebulous definition of dispositions and make providing explicit feedback easier and more refined. A focus on giving explicit feedback by the coach to the teacher enhances the three coaching strategies below.

**Coaching Techniques**

*Instructional Coaching Strategies*

Instructional coaching strategies focus on knowledge and skills the teacher wishes to develop. The coach provides explicit information, modeling, scaffolding, and suggestions for the improvement of practice. These types of interactions are generally focused on meeting a specific goal, can be broken down into discreet steps or sub-goals, and rely heavily on the coach to provide guidance or serve in the “expert” capacity. Instructional coaching is effective when what is to be learned is discreet or finite (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; New Teacher Center, 2009).

An example of instructional coaching would be a middle level teacher who is struggling to provide effective feedback to his students, as his feedback does not seem to support learning gains for his students. The coach could examine the teacher’s current practices and provide specific examples of different types of feedback that would be
developmentally appropriate and targeted at the learning goals already identified for that particular group of students. The teacher could then incorporate the new approaches and, with the coach, evaluate if improvements to practice were effective at impacting student achievement. Once the teacher experiences success with new strategies, he may reconsider his belief about the role of feedback on student learning and development.

**Collaborative Coaching**

Collaborative coaching strategies are co-constructed by the coach and teacher to provide the teacher an opportunity to learn alongside their coach. In collaborative activities, coaches assist teachers, influence rather than dominate activities, and work with the teacher to analyze data and co-plan solutions to problems (Bloom et al., 2005; Goldrick, Zabala, & Burn, 2013; New Teacher Center, 2009). For example, a teacher might have trouble working as a part of her grade-level team. The coach could participate alongside the teacher in a team planning session. Then, the coach and teacher could meet to discuss potential areas where the teacher could connect or work with team members based on observations and interactions with the team. The pair then establishes an action plan for the teacher’s collaborative efforts with colleagues.

**Facilitative Coaching**

Facilitative coaching strategies shift responsibility to the teacher, and the coach’s role becomes one of facilitator. Coaches using facilitative techniques ask more questions while the teacher guides the conversation through self-reflection. At this level, strategies are designed to support teachers to inquire into their own teaching and utilize knowledge and skills they have already learned (Bloom et al., 2005; New Teacher Center, 2009). An example of facilitative coaching might be for the coach to observe and record a teacher’s lesson, then meet with the teacher to watch and analyze the instructional moves observed. While watching, the coach provides thought-provoking questions to prompt the teacher’s reflective thinking. The questions are scaffolded to promote inquiry by the teacher and encourage a habit of continuous growth. This process also models for the teacher best practices for middle level educators to use with students, promoting metacognition in the classroom.

**Conclusion**

Providing middle level students with teachers who have dispositions most well suited to the specific needs of young adolescents is what students deserve. As dispositions of new and experienced teachers need to be cultivated or strengthened to meet the changing demands of middle school curriculum and learners, coaching practices must be in place to encourage and support the necessary growth of teachers so they can effectively teach their students. The suggestions above are not comprehensive but do offer some concrete practices to meet educators where they are. This purposeful and differentiated coaching approach parallels what is purported as best practice for students and promotes a culture of lifelong learning for all teachers. We must invest in practices and systems that enable middle level teachers to develop dispositions best suited to meeting the needs of young adolescents so students have a greater chance for success in and out of school.
References


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Annotated References


The purpose of this report, the first of three on related topics, was to comment on the state of teacher professional development in the U.S. and provide recommendations for a more coherent, comprehensive system for educators. Findings indicate that professional learning experiences are episodic, often fragmented and disconnected from real problems of practice. The researchers focused on systemic conditions necessary for transformational learning and found that many schools and districts have not allocated the necessary resources to offer the time and opportunities essential to intense, sustained professional development that includes regular follow-up and reinforcement. Improvements in the infrastructure of professional learning need to be a focus moving forward.


Diez makes the case for the use of coaching as an appropriate intervention for developing teacher candidates’ dispositions. She offers several examples of coaching in practice, using case studies to illustrate various approaches to coaching. The use of coaching shows respect for the individual differences among teachers as well as attention to the context in which those being coached are teaching. The ultimate goals of coaching dispositions is clarifying the vision of the teacher as well as assisting the teacher to produce the desired results in his or her professional practice.

This guide explores practices for supporting new teacher development. The authors suggest the creation of high-quality induction systems that include: consistent and sustained communication with a mentor, numerous classroom observations, multiple and periodic opportunities to engage in reflection and self-assessment, and timely feedback that will enable teachers to make relevant instructional decisions throughout the school year. The authors purport that instructional improvement is a “collective responsibility and is too critical and time-intensive an endeavor to leave solely to school administrators” and thus, teacher leaders should be encouraged and enabled to serve as collaborative mentors and peer evaluators.


This is a comprehensive book that provides research on a milieu of topics and issues related to improving middle level education. Authored by middle level education scholars and advocates, this book offers research and resources on academic excellence and diversity, developmental responsiveness, curriculum integration, technology, service-learning, de-tracking, social equity, bullying, and much more. Of particular interest is McEwin and Smith’s chapter on The professional preparation of middle level teachers, as it speaks to the importance of effective teacher preparation programs that provide varied and ongoing opportunities for middle level teacher candidates to learn about the unique characteristics, needs, and interests of middle level students and how to use this knowledge in their practice. This chapter serves as a great resource for administrators, teacher-coaches, and teachers desiring to strengthen knowledge on the attributes necessary in middle level educators.

Additional Resources


Author Information

Alicia Wenzel has served the field of education for almost 20 years working with K-16 students. Currently, Alicia is a teacher educator specializing in curriculum and assessment. Previously, she taught elementary and middle grades focusing on mathematics and Language Arts. Areas of research include teacher preparation, teacher retention, teacher dispositions, developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment, and middle level advocacy.

Jennifer Roberts is an education consultant currently serving as a grant manager at Portland Metro Teaching and Learning Coalition. Previously, Jennifer was a teacher educator working in the Master of Arts in Teaching program teaching methods and foundation courses for candidates working toward elementary and middle school licensure. Research interests include teacher dispositions, literacy, civil rights and social action, and middle grades education. Before working as a teacher educator and consultant, Dr. Roberts was a classroom teacher for 10 years.

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