Coaches' Time in Data Review Meetings

Preparing for and facilitating data review meetings with groups of teachers is often found in instructional coaches' job descriptions.

Dr. Heather Hill, a researcher and professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, suggests that we might want to reconsider the investment of the coaches' and teachers' time in these meetings. In a review of studies that examined the impact of whole-team data discussions, Hill found that two had positive impacts, one had a negative impact, and the rest had zero impact.

In an interview, she stated: "Across 10 different programs which tried to see this theory in action, there were zero [showing] impacts of getting teachers to really be productive, understand what kids don't know, and change their instruction. That convinced me we're doing something wrong in schools."

Those are tough words for a coach who is invested in the preparation and facilitation time for data team meetings. Hill pointed out that our current practice has an opportunity cost. Teachers might better spend the time they're currently investing in data team meetings in some other way that's more productive in helping them positively impact student learning. An important thought for instructional coaches and administrators to ponder.

When asked what might happen in data meetings currently that creates these zero impacts, Dr. Hill labeled what I might call a search for reasons about the assessment results. As an example, time might be spent identifying that the student was

having a “bad day” on the day of the assessment. While that may be true, it doesn’t lead to any change in teacher practice. Perhaps more importantly Hill identified that when the assessment results suggest a need for remediation, due to all the time pressures on teachers, there’s a tendency to look for a “quick fix.” In other words, how would we quickly engage the student in a remedial assignment or reteaching that fixes the problem?

The quick fix may cause us to miss a deeper dive into exploring what was behind the instructional practices or a teacher’s need for additional learning that initially led to the students’ misunderstanding. As I read and listened to Dr. Hill’s findings, I recalled hearing teacher and administrator complaints about the time spent in data meetings. This connected with some of my own observations of such meetings that seemed to be jumping through hoops more than leading to a deeper understanding that produced teacher learning and change.

This thought connects with my favorite PLC question, “What do the students need us to learn?” Administrators reviewing school data might be asking, “What do the teachers need us to learn.” I have suggested that data walls (data tracking student performance) might best be labeled as “question walls.” The reason we’re looking at the student data is to identify what questions emerge. Those questions should be leading to teacher learning. A focus on a quick fix remediation tends to interfere or disrupt with teacher and coach learning which is likely to take a greater time and

energy investment.

I found an article in the Journal of Educational Change titled, "How School Leaders Can Build Effective Data Teams: Five Building Blocks For a New Wave of Data-Informed Decision Making," which reinforces the need for data meetings to lead to action (change). The steps that were suggested in the article included forming a hypothesis around change in practice that would lead to change in student learning outcomes and the collection of evidence with an ongoing reflection that leads to new teacher learning. That learning can occur even if the original hypothesis is wrong and takes the team back to the starting point and the formation of a different hypothesis. If you're a teacher leader, administrator, or instructional coach who's currently facilitating data meetings, consider tracking the changes that are occurring in teacher practices, as well as tracking the changes that are occurring in student learning outcomes. In effect, data team meetings should be a component of teacher professional growth.

I am pondering the connection between data team meeting effectiveness and the difference between teachers functioning as franchisees rather than team members. Might teachers who are not sensing a responsibility for the progress of all students be unlikely to engage in the deeper conversations of teacher learning and changing practice. Franchisees may engage better with coaches individually than in groups. My bias is investing in creating team commitments to students that generate continuous learning for educators.