

A Principal and Coaching: Possibilities and Limitations*

Ralph Techeira is a relatively new principal in a middle school in the southwest. He had been a classroom teacher for 3 years, and given his dedication to his students, he was encouraged to study for an administrator credential. Having obtained it, he rapidly moved from being Assistant Principal to becoming a principal in one year.

Mr. Techeira had many ideas for how to run his school. It was in one of the poorest areas in the city and the scores of students, especially those in the middle school, were the lowest in the district.

The district provided a virtual curriculum for English Language Arts which had been developed by district coaches. Structured for a 45-minute lesson a day, it centered on a brief text and contained many questions for students to respond after reading individually. The same coaches visited classes randomly to observe if the curriculum was being applied as intended.

One of the 8th grade ELA teachers in Mr. Techeira's school, Ms. King, replied to an invitation from the district to participate in a study intended to prepare teachers and support them during the 12-week implementation of a newly developed ELA curriculum. While preparing for the implementation required giving up 3 days at the beginning of the Christmas break, and one day immediately at the end of it, Ms. King was interested in the opportunity. She had not been pleased with the district mandated curriculum and wondered how the 3 units in the study could improve her practice and benefit her students.

At the request of the superintendent, who heard about the opportunity in a conference, Mr. Techeira had sent all ELA teachers in his building a note inviting them to be part of the implementation and professional development opportunity. Ms. King was the only teacher in the school to accept participating, and she was pleased she had done so during the preparation. The curriculum engaged students in interactions with each other as they prepared, interacted with, and extended newly gained ideas. More importantly, each lesson extended over several periods, usually 5, thus engaging students in their gradual understanding of an important theme.

However, as she started implementing the curriculum, and district coaches visited her class, she was dismayed that they complained her class was chaotic, many students were talking at the same time, and more importantly, their official curriculum had been set away. Ms. King talked to Mr. Techeira about this impasse. She stressed that she had never seen the students so engaged, and showed him some of the thoughtful, and increasingly more sophisticated writing they engaged in. The principal gave Ms. King permission to try the curriculum as it was

* Prepared by Aída Walqui, WestEd

supposed to be implemented, during the 12 weeks of the trial. Although students had not been prepared by the experimental curriculum for interim tests, Ms. King's classes did extremely well, demonstrating that the materials were not harmful to the students, quite the opposite.

At the end of the year, the principal, impressed by Ms. King's results, asked her if she would like to become an instructional coach for ELA classes in 7th and 8th grades. She happily accepted.

Mr. Techeira was excited that Ms. King had accepted to be a coach in her school. He did not feel the need to make any official announcements about this new coaching arrangement. When Ms. King visited teachers, her presence came as a total surprise to them. More problematic, though, was the compliant attitude of teachers to following the mandated curriculum, and being concerned about the visits of regular district coaches who would evaluate their faithful implementation of the official curriculum during one-period lessons.

Ms. King has asked to discuss coaching plans with him. Rather than the 10-minute "catch you" visit to each teacher, where the presence or absence of certain behaviors was marked, she wanted to propose longer visits where she could observe the unpacking of ideas by the students. Mr. Techeira, however, assumed she was doing well, and given his intensive schedule, he postponed meeting with her.