



IT WORKED!

It's about Pace: Taking the Time to Make it Work

AnnMarie Varlotta

Math Instructional Support Teacher

Howard County Public School System, MD

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Mathematics coaching is a marathon, not a sprint. As the coach or instructional leader you need to know the plays in your playbook and your end game, but you also need to know that the game is everlasting and ever-changing. Where do you begin? One of the most essential elements to mathematics coaching is building and nurturing relationships with the mathematics teachers--including developing personal and professional relationships. For me, the personal relationships were easily formed through casual conversations about weekend plans and common family lives. Through the continued personal conversations, I was able to bridge some of the conversations to a professional journal article I had read or a new instructional strategy.

When I first became a middle school mathematics coach, I found out, early on, that my new colleagues were not used to working collaboratively with a mathematics teacher leader, and I endured “everyday” resistance from teachers. I had to find a way to work with them in a personal, professional and productive capacity. At our first math team meeting, I engaged teachers in solving a worthwhile mathematical task with manipulatives as an instructional strategy to build conceptual understanding. Before I even started the task they pushed the Katie Kubes™ away and stated, “We don’t play with math toys!” I immediately knew I had a lot of work ahead of me and soon realized that I had to take my time to understand this group of teachers both individually and collectively. But, more importantly, I had to learn how work with these people—my colleagues—and I needed to develop a relationship where we knew and respected each other.

I began to build these relationships with some “housekeeping” items for the team which included: cleaning and organizing the math closet with instructional materials, making sure all teachers had the materials they needed, volunteering to assist in mathematics classes, and helping to analyze and report mathematics achievement data for the school. Believe it or not, I even volunteered to and actually made copies of instructional materials for the teachers! I now realize that this “housekeeping” was actually a path toward building relationships with these teachers—my teachers. I made sure that if I made a commitment to a teacher, whether it was to volunteer to assist in a class or provide a specific resource, that I honored that promise. I made sure I was always ready, prepared, and willing.

Although I was meeting some of the many of the day-to-day needs of my colleagues, deep down, I felt like my actual impact on teaching and learning was minimal, at best. I began asking myself questions like, “Did I leave the mathematics classroom for the right reasons?” and “Am I really helping teachers increase student mathematics achievement in this school?” There were times that I would have answered with a swift “no” to both of these questions. I wasn’t always sure if I was taking the right steps to make the necessary shifts in mathematics instruction.

And yet, I was taking my time. And I was truly working on building relationships. I was able to build credibility with the teachers while using my own content knowledge to assist the teachers with questions and concerns they had with curriculum materials and related resources. For instance, when one of my Algebra teachers was challenged by a parent on a test question that came home for review, I worked with the teacher on truly understanding the student’s misconception. I found that my earlier “housekeeping” activities grew into an ever evolving and expanding interaction with my teachers.

While taking the time to build relationships with my teachers, there were still moments, maybe many moments, when I felt like I was doing the work of an over-compensated clerical assistant. But, in

early January, I approached the two grade 6 math teachers with the idea of using a planning period to meet together as a group and map out the next unit they were going to be teaching. They seemed interested. Was this an actual breakthrough for me? I just figured, I would take this opportunity and go for it! Prior to our initial meeting, I researched and then gathered instructional resources including rigorous mathematical tasks, journal articles, hands-on materials, and evidence-based instructional strategies designed to help increase student and teacher engagement. The teachers were extremely receptive to sharing ideas and were active participants during the meeting.

Following the meeting, the teachers implemented the lessons and instructional activities as planned. The first meeting was a success and the teachers immediately requested another planning meeting. This pair of teachers served as my coaching “springboard model” for the other math team members. Our next steps together involved working through a coaching cycle of unpacking the curriculum and planning for instruction and assessment, peer observation, feedback, and reflection.

The involvement and impact with my mathematics teacher colleagues grew to include the entire mathematics team, which engaged teachers of each mathematics course within two years. Looking back, I now realize that my slow and steady pace actually worked. I took my time, I gradually built and nurtured relationships, and I feel we, as a mathematics team, are making progress. This race is not close to being finished, after all, it’s a marathon, but I will continue to run - daily.

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