

REPORT ON 5TH NATIONAL COACHING CONFERENCE: MELBOURNE 2017

I feel extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to attend the 5th National Coaching in Education Conference entitled “The Coaching Approach: Generating Learning” and am most grateful to APPA for funding my attendance. There were approximately 28 kiwis representing us, with a fair number from Auckland, and The Education Group presented a breakout session.

Van Nieuwerburgh was the first keynote, suggesting that creating the conditions for effective learning might be a modern, good definition of what coaching is in education, whether one to one or within groups. We should ask ourselves whether coaching is an end in itself or a means to a goal. He suggests coaching is used to improve leadership, to improve professional practice and that it has untapped potential to strengthen community engagement. The end goal is to improve student success and wellbeing. Look out for “Leaders’ Guide to Coaching in Schools’ coming in a couple of months.

Simon Breakspear had significant impact on me and those I spoke with. He advocates for an agile mindset to regenerate and sustain learning through coaching conversations, rather than just telling. It is hard to unleash human potential through learning. Our default approach to educational change is; long and detailed plans, setting precise targets for future performance compliance, assumptions of predictable, linear and sequential change in a stable system, and leaders who act as though they can do things ‘for’ and ‘to’ people. Breakspear says that actually it is about what works, when and for whom. So, how do we make meaningful progress? He suggests:

1. The stuff that matters most are the people and the interactions. Coaching is useful here because the problems we face in education are complex and relational.
2. Leading change when we don’t know the answers. This is pioneering work, where we adopt collaborative, evidence-informed professional practices.

Agile leadership means a different mindset which responds to change, embraces ambiguity and leans in to complexity to see what is really there. This is done by; having a clear focus (Do less better and don’t confuse activity with impact), learn better all the time (Go deep into the learning pit, contemplate, reflect, seek out feedback), iterate better than before, launch before you are ready (analogy of technology), persevere and remember that continuous improvement is better than delayed perfection. The three critical skills of agile methods are clarification (making things as simple as possible), incubation (designing for our local context with like minded people) and amplification (getting more of what is working).

Simon used a mountain biking analogy to say “Look to the middle ground” rather than thinking too big.

In summary he suggests we “Think big, act small and go together. Lean into it.”

Andy Buck’s impact on me was to remind me that teachers do want to please the principal, so what crisp messages am I giving out about what I value? Influences on teacher behaviours will be habit, peer pressure and what I value. Response to difficulty development is comfort, stretch and panic. We want high

challenge with low threat. Long term memory requires rehearsal, so our habits can lead to excellence.

Persuade by asking questions, and practising being curious rather than judgemental. If a leader starts by knowing their personal qualities, they can design their leadership approaches to fit the culture and climate to influence discretionary effort. This links to Goleman's work on leadership styles. Growth coaching fits here, equally suitable for a three minute conversation as for ninety minutes of talk.

Andy quoted feedback showing that feedback on lessons showed great variability and listed feedback misconceptions of: weighing the pig vs fattening the pig, more is better, writing it up is all important, just tell them and they will be motivated to change, they will know the best way to improve, hold them to account! The feedback hamburger days are over. Instead, try feedback tennis, comprising first serve positive feedback, second serve You've got me thinking about...(takes you to a coaching conversation).

Professor Lea Waters describes herself as a 'pracademic' and spoke powerfully about strengths based parenting as a way of building resilience and optimism in children. Her research reveals that an authoritarian parenting style which is warm and loving, firm but fair is a significant predictor of teenage satisfaction, engagement and perseverance in academic work and when a growth mindset is added results are 19% higher. Strengths based mindsets encourages engagement and perseverance because the teenagers know their strengths. Strengths based parenting also helps younger children deal with emotional and task related stress because they have coping skills based on their strengths.

Jason Pascoe and John Campbell talked about using a coaching approach within teams, to create learning, in which we consider group processes and decision making processes as the add on when there are teams. Coaching is about achieving goals. There are three elements of coaching; growth model, coaching skills and coaching as a 'way of being'.

The eight coaching skills are developing trust, being present, listening actively, clarifying, empathising, being succinct, asking the best questions and giving feedback. Coaching as a 'way of being' includes; a growth mindset, personality style, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, unconditional positive regard, a solution focused stance and is non-judgemental (and curious). A 'coaching approach' brings the best elements of individual solutions focused coaching to a multi-voice, multi-perspective team context. The elements are an outcomes focus (what's wanted?), strengths / resource focus, small step movement and sustainable progress.

There are 5 Ps of team effectiveness; patterns, processes, people, projects and purpose. Is our team clear on its purpose and goals? Are team members clear about what they are supposed to do and how they contribute to achieving team goals? Does our team have high levels of trust? Do people understand and respect the differences that each member brings to the team?

Team thinking has a structure of data, interpersonal skills and a structured, visible framework. There is an agreement gradient in team decisions. High functioning teams are more positive in their talk, have equal amounts of inquiry to advocacy and self to other talk. An ideal team member has working knowledge

(experience and problem solving ability) and team work skills (openness, supportiveness, action orientation and positive personal style). Van Nieuerburg talked about using 'a coaching approach' as the direction formal coaching is moving towards in schools. This is applying the various transferable elements of coaching to other 'learning by talking' contexts. Coaching is a 'way of being', vital in agile leadership. Leaving people more energised. It is a mindset. A challenge is to have formal coaching and a coaching approach both working together in a school. Teams make it all more complex.

Dr Leeds has produced a practical guide for schools called "Stand by Me: Enhancing professional practice through coaching.". She says it is evolution not revolution. She distinguished between teacher practices (actions which sustain human activities) and school procedures (mechanisms that help us undertake these practices). Coaching can enhance educational practices, allow professional learning through co-construction and self efficacy. Her reference book is "School Guide to Coaching" based on the work of Timperley and her own research. She talked about leading change. Change is initiating change (getting teachers talking), developing practice (through collaborative coaching) and sustaining changes in practice (through agency and advocacy).

Some finishing thoughts....

"Your own insight is much more powerful than my advice." – Stoltzfus

"Conversation is the fundamental unit of change. If you change the conversation, then there's every chance you'll change everything that surrounds it." - Jakson & Waldman

I thank the APPA for granting me the opportunity for these two days of learning, which will help me in sabbatical's literature review and also in planning my visit and outcomes.

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