EMPOWERING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP: FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOMS

At a Glance

Miriam, an Educate coach, collaborated with teachers Ms. Sheehan and Ms. Addo to enhance collaboration in the classroom. By refining protocols and fostering independent problem-solving, they empowered students to engage confidently. This case study exemplifies how Educate's coaching approach can transform learning dynamics, promoting self-efficacy and productive struggle meaningful change.

Challenges

- Unease with Collaborative Learning
- Diverse Protocols for Collaboration
- Overwhelming Teacher Intervention
- Varied Learning Needs
- Lack of Structured Collaboration

Key Metrics

- **Engaged Students:** Increased active participation and enthusiasm in collaborative tasks.
- **Confident Educators:** Teachers' self-assurance in innovative teaching methods for collaboration.
- **Effective Peer Collaboration:** Improved teamwork and communication skills among students.
- **Independent Learners:** Students develop autonomy and problem-solving abilities.
- **Teacher Leaders:** Educators embrace leadership roles, sharing successful strategies.
- **School-wide Collaboration:** Coaching fosters a collaborative culture across the community.

Solutions

- **Tailored Protocols:** Create custom protocols to fit students' diverse needs, as seen in Ms. Addo and Miriam's collaboration.
- **Scaffolded Tasks:** Break tasks into steps for student success, a strategy used by both Ms. Addo and Ms. Sheehan.
- **Teacher Partnership:** Form strong coach–teacher partnerships, like Miriam's work with Ms. Sheehan and Ms. Addo, for aligned goals.
- **Gradual Release of Control:** Step back to empower students, exemplified by Ms. Sheehan's approach.
- **Reflective Practice:** Develop reflective skills, guided by coaches such as Miriam, to adapt teaching methods.
- **Teacher Leadership:** Showcase successes, allowing teacher leaders like Ms. Addo and Ms. Sheehan to inspire collaboration.

Developing the Courage to Collaborate

As teachers plan learning, curriculum provides guidance for what to teach and perhaps how to teach it. However, it is the teacher who brings knowledge of who they teach to the table. Educate's framework includes Learner Centered Design principles and a focus on collaboration within their Innovation Spectrum, putting people at the center of the learning. This stance impacts how coaches approach their work and ways teachers bring about change to their classrooms. This case describes Miriam's coaching experiences with Ms. Sheehan* and Ms. Addo* and highlights how Learner Centered Design principles in coaching and teaching can improve collaborative skills and opportunities, as well as a sense of self-efficacy for teachers and students.

The Importance of Self-Efficacy in Learning and Life

Self-efficacy beliefs influence how people motivate themselves and act. One of the most effective ways to increase self-efficacy is mastery of tasks (Bandura, 1995). If an individual experiences success at a task, that can increase their agency to continue to act. Ms. Addo and Miriam approached building students' self-efficacy in collaboration by scaffolding tasks so students experienced success and developed the courage to collaborate.

Bandura (1995) also cautions, "If people experience only easy successes, they come to expect quick results and are easily discouraged by failure. A resilient sense of efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort…teaching that success usually requires sustained effort" (p. 3). Ms. Sheehan's and Miriam's work together in the coaching cycle included monitoring teacher intervention time, one strategy that allows students to engage in productive struggle by not stepping in to help too soon (Warshauer, 2015).

Miriam also emphasized that both teachers' mindsets were, "Centered on their kids and [they brought] a can-do attitude for the shifts they wanted to see." Likewise, Miriam centered her work on the teachers and school, referencing the school's needs assessment prior to her first coaching session. She gained clarity around the different areas of focus so she could align her work with work already on the teachers' plate. This helped teachers feel supported and, "breathe a sigh of relief" that she was helping them with current areas of work, instead of expecting additional work.

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Scaffolding Courage to Collaborate

A visit to Ms. Addo's classroom at the beginning of the coaching cycle surfaced the need for better structure around collaborative segments. Students seemed to have unease around these cooperative times in class, a fear about self-starting and engaging in peer conversation and questioning the "wrong" way. One challenge was two different protocols for collaboration prescribed for Ms. Addo to use with students. The protocols were not designed in a way that students could easily use them independently.

Considering the barriers her students experienced to collaboration, Ms. Addo and Miriam set a goal of, "Increasing collaborative engagement, investigation, and reflection." They decided to condense the protocols into one, and developed a clearer and more sequential structure to the protocols. Students could have choice within each category, but the protocol would lead them through a process effectively by providing a tighter structure for collaboration.

They also divided these collaborative tasks into smaller chunks that students could practice and experience success. Students saw they could be successful and developed the courage to overcome their fears around collaboration. Ms. Addo shared in her reflections the difference she saw in students participating in the group space: "I've noticed that students who used to not solve, are actually attempting to solve the problems (they are annotating, showing their work more) - before they would just leave it blank." Miriam observed in a later classroom visit that, "Students were driving the conversation forward...self-sufficient...having specific roles that fed into each other."

Stepping Away Allows Students to Shine

Early coaching sessions with Ms. Sheehan surfaced her awareness that she may be hindering learning and collaboration for her students because of a desire to help, perhaps with too much immediate feedback. A goal for the coaching cycle became, "Creating structure around collaborative time in the class that pulls the teacher back and helps the students lean in." In a subsequent coaching session, Ms. Sheehan shared students' see-think-solve and displayed immense pride in what they could accomplish on their own. Her students had diverse learning needs that made accessing curriculum a challenge and now this evidence of what they could accomplish independently further reinforced her belief in their capabilities.

In Ms. Sheehan's written reflections as part of the coaching cycle she celebrated that, "They've been motivated to figure it out on their own. Students who are stronger know to collaborate [by] asking questions...holding off to wait for other members...I've seen a lot more independence...more chatter instead of crickets." She acknowledges that she still needs to guard against stepping into students' quiet thinking time and look for additional ways for them to demonstrate their understanding, differentiating for the wide range of learning needs. Ms. Sheehan's work with her students confirmed that appropriate differentiation can provide opportunities for all students to engage in productive struggle, including those with disabilities (Lynch et al., 2018).

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Conclusion

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*Pseudonyms

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