

Team
**PEER COACHING AND TEAM BUILDING IN CENTERBURG ELEMENTARY
SCHOOLS**

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The Centerburg Public School System had an elementary school Spanish immersion program since the early 1970's. In 1985, a partial immersion program was developed. In this program, social studies, science, and mathematics were taught to the students using the Spanish language. In this way students not only learned the subject matter, but also gained language skills. Immersion teaching is a widely accepted method of language instruction.

After several years of program existence, the city's Language Program Director, working with a language professor from a local university, received a grant to improve the elementary Spanish language programs in the Centerburg Public Schools. Three elementary schools, each with a Spanish partial immersion program, were selected to participate in a two-year program to (a) improve the effectiveness of elementary school teachers who teach subject content in the Spanish language partial immersion program, and (b) assist the teachers in the development of additional language skills and classroom materials.

At the end of the first year, the grant had facilitated a number of beneficial changes, including the creation and refinement of the Spanish curriculum at participating schools, the development of curriculum strategies, and formalization of the language arts curriculum. Furthermore, the teachers appreciated the opportunities, encouragement, and guidance offered through working with the team of consultants.

After the first year of the project, circumstances forced a complete turnover in the project team. Because of the changes in personnel and the expressed needs of the Spanish teachers, the original proposal was reviewed and revised by the Language Program Director. The second-year goals included the continued development of classroom materials but focused primarily on team building and peer coaching with the Spanish immersion teachers in three elementary schools. Because of the focus on organization development activities, another faculty member from the University OD program was asked to take over the project director's role. He formed a new team to continue the project.

Project Activities

Team building activities included a preliminary survey, day-long team building workshops, monthly follow-up sessions at each of the schools, a follow-up survey at the end of the project, and group activities to increase the teachers' language proficiency. The workshops also included a focus on peer coaching, with an emphasis on encouraging the teachers to provide peer coaching to each other.

Preliminary survey

In the fall of the second year, the project team developed a customized survey to assess the Spanish teachers' attitudes and interests. In December, a member of the project team visited each of the participating sites and administered the survey to the Spanish teachers. The teachers were assured that all information would remain anonymous and would be reported in summary form only. The survey was designed to assess the teachers' disposition regarding cooperation in the school, communications, feeling valued for the work they do, supervision, Spanish language skills, and overall morale.

The responses on the survey were all very positive. Even the lowest scores did not seem to reflect any serious problems. Communications was the area of most concern. No one school stood apart from the others in terms of expressed problems or strengths; all seemed to be equally strong. Overall, the teachers believed that their programs were basically healthy, and they expressed only minor concerns. Instead of needing to correct deficits, there was the unique opportunity to build on strengths.

The survey also asked the teachers to indicate their level of interest in a number of topics for future consideration in the development of workshops. The teachers indicated an interest in a number of topics related to the preparation of Spanish curriculum materials and delivery of the Spanish language.

Data from the survey were analyzed and reports generated for the teachers at each of the participating schools. A separate report was generated for each school as there was no benefit to be gained from publicly comparing the schools with each other. Each school was assigned a consultant from the project team, and this person presented the reports, helped interpret the findings, and led a discussion of the results at each of the participating schools. These discussions led to the development of topics for future meetings.

Day-long workshops

Day-long, team building/peer coaching workshops were held for the Spanish teachers from each school involved in the project. The purposes of these workshops were to help the teachers: 1) understand the principles and practices of teambuilding, 2) support each other in the implementation of a continued teambuilding and peer coaching structure, 3) develop and promote cohesion within the team to enable successful practice sessions of peer coaching, and 4) develop and use tools and techniques for team-building and peer coaching within the team. The tools and techniques included problem-solving, communication skills, active listening, coaching, feedback, and the action planning process.

These workshops were facilitated by members of the project team and included a set of materials and activities that had been specifically developed for these workshops. The teachers received a workbook to use during the workshop and to take with them as a reference.

The workshops were held in a hotel in downtown Centerburg. Teachers were given paid time to attend. In these workshops the teachers expressed various concerns about the project's

goals. Non-instructional tasks, such as answering the phone, packaging take-home notices, and other administrative tasks, were already reducing the time teachers had available for developing and teaching content. Peer coaching was seen as another task that would take them away from their primary task of teaching. This was also seen as threatening to the academic freedom of the teachers in their own classrooms. Coaching was more readily accepted when it became clear that they already were spontaneously engaging in many peer-coaching activities, such as asking each other for assistance and problem solving.

Additional concerns had to do with the administration of the immersion program itself. Frequently, non-Spanish speaking students were being admitted into the immersion program without an adequate background in the Spanish language. These students could not understand the content of the science, math, or social studies classes due to their inability to understand the Spanish language. This situation created numerous problems for the teachers. Should they slow the pace of the content, in effect retarding the progress of the Spanish-speaking students, to allow for the non-Spanish speaking students to catch up, or should they forge ahead and run the risk that the newcomers might not understand? The teachers expressed a need for more time to be allowed for the development of the curriculum, as well as time to refine the scope and sequence of language lessons. Teachers voiced concern over a sometimes adversarial relationship with school system administrators and administrators within their own school.

The various problems and concerns became the subject for extensive discussion and were used to teach problem-solving and communications skills in the workshops. It was agreed that many of these problems would continue to be addressed at monthly follow-up meetings to be held at each of the schools.

The teachers reported that they found the workshops helpful. They stated that the workshops were the first opportunities they had had to get together as teams to discuss issues of importance. Although all agreed on the value of working together as a team, they were not willing to continue to do so without compensation. It was believed that they were already giving more than 100% to the school and that the school system should allow them time to meet as part of their regular duties. They also expressed a need for additional funding to purchase materials (books, activities, films) to teach Spanish. Although they knew of the existence of excellent materials, they were frustrated that they did not have access to them.

Follow-up sessions

Five monthly follow-up sessions were scheduled at each of the schools to reinforce and continue the work started in the day-long team-building/peer-coaching workshops. Teachers were paid to attend these sessions. In these sessions teachers were encouraged to discuss the problems and concerns relevant to them, their school, their students, and the overall Spanish partial immersion project. These sessions were facilitated by the same person who had led the full-day workshop, enhancing familiarity, trust, and continuity between the teachers and the project personnel.

One Spanish (School A) team met five times. The two-hour meetings were held at the school. These meetings were well attended with only an occasional absence. The first part of

the meetings was devoted to dealing with unfinished business and team matters. The rest of the time was used to discuss and practice skills, such as feedback, communications, and conflict management. The April and May meetings were totally devoted to using the skills that had been learned to deal with actual team decisions, issues, and conflicts.

Most of the team members appeared to be committed to improving the work of the group and using the team and peer-coaching processes toward that end. Individual commitment to the process did vary from meeting to meeting and from person to person. The consistency of the monthly group meetings led to increased trust among team members and contributed to their willingness to face difficult issues. The team continued to use and refine the skills that had been taught and reinforced in the workshop and follow-up meetings. A number of systems issues were discussed, most of which were beyond the control of the group.

The second Spanish team (School B) held monthly follow-up meetings, each lasting about two hours. Attendance varied from half to three-quarters of the teachers from this school. During each session, the team identified pertinent issues, prioritized them, and selected issues to address at that session. The group would discuss the importance of the issue and create action plans, assigning specific tasks to members of the group. By the end of the year, the teachers were able to recognize the changes they had made over the course of the project and expressed gratitude for the follow-up meetings.

Despite vigorous attempts to schedule follow-up meetings, the group from School C met only once. All of the Spanish teachers attended, although none was available at the agreed-upon starting time and arrived at various times during the meeting. Many of the teachers seemed either preoccupied with other concerns or not personally invested in the meeting. Some mentioned that they would rather be somewhere else, while others used the telephone or sorted through paperwork during the meeting. After much encouragement by the facilitator, the teachers stated that they wanted to work on sharing Spanish language materials that they had developed. A future meeting was scheduled at which the teachers would share these materials. The meeting was to be held at the home of one of the teachers on a Saturday. Some of the teachers expressed dismay that they would have to give up some weekend time but agreed that it would be a worthwhile activity. The facilitator would not attend this meeting but would contact the team one week after the scheduled meeting for a report and to schedule the next follow-up meeting. Later, it was learned that the scheduled meeting to share materials had been canceled. No explanation for the cancellation was offered. Attempts to schedule additional follow-up meetings were unsuccessful. Despite calls to each of the teachers, no further follow-up sessions could be scheduled.

The Spanish teachers at this school were not able to find time to meet after school. Most were involved in after-school activities, including coaching student sports, teaching continuing education classes, and other school meetings. They felt that the school was placing too many demands on their time and energy. They did not feel a need for additional team building. Although they liked the idea of peer coaching, it seemed unworkable as there was not enough time available to engage in such activities. The teachers did express a need for additional resources and time for curriculum building.

Final survey and evaluation

Based on the initial survey, a second survey was developed, including the same set of items, and another set of questions that asked the teachers to evaluate the entire project in terms of their personal investment in the project; support they received for the project; the value of the day-long workshop, the monthly follow-up sessions, peer-coaching activities, and the activities designed to increase their language proficiency. There was also a section of open-ended questions. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the surveys were returned. While it is not possible to determine why many of the surveys were not returned, it is known that many of the teachers had plans to leave for study overseas immediately following the end of the school year.

Survey results

Twenty-four of the 45 items had mean scores over 4.00 on the 5-point scale, and only three items had a mean score below the scale's midpoint of 3.00. Given normal respondent tendency to regress to about a 3.00 mean, these scores appeared to be quite positive.

Because of the low number of surveys, statistical tests comparing the first and second survey had very low power, resulting in a low probability of detecting significant (let alone practical) differences. It appeared that the teachers continued to perceive the organization as strong with few areas of weakness. None of the questions showed a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$).

When the survey items were grouped into the six identified categories (Cooperation, Communications, Feeling Valued, Supervision, Spanish Language Skills, and Morale), Communications again had the lowest score. This was true overall and from school to school. Morale had the highest score overall and from school to school. This was also the case on the first survey.

The teachers indicated that, although they enjoyed the day-long workshops, they did not find them valuable in terms of improving their classroom performance. They also indicated that their personal investment in the project was low. They indicated that the level of perceived support provided by the teachers' supervisors was low. The teachers indicated that they did not have sufficient time on the job to participate in peer coaching, that they had not participated in peer coaching, and that the conditions at the school did not encourage the application of peer-coaching principles.

The language practice activities (monthly meetings at Spanish-type restaurants at which only Spanish was spoken) were the highest rated component of the project. This was true overall and at each of the schools.

Open-ended questions

The survey included nine open-ended questions. The teachers indicated that the most valuable aspect of the project was the opportunity to meet with teachers at their school to share ideas. The least valuable part of the project had to do with team building and peer

coaching due to a scarcity of time for the project. The open-ended comments suggested that the teachers had a desire to improve themselves and their performance in the classroom, and this desire facilitated their participation in the project activities. Lack of time was the single largest factor hindering participation. The teachers saw better communication and working relationships with team members as outcomes of the project. They expressed a desire for more attention devoted to the development of curriculum and materials for the classroom in future workshops. Most of the teachers believed that their students did benefit, indirectly, from the project, although few gave specifics.

Debriefing

With this information in hand, the project leaders and facilitators met to discuss the project and to suggest next steps. They asked a number of questions of themselves: Why was the project not more successful? How might the outcomes have been changed? What should the next steps be?

For a complete description of this case, see:

Johansen, B-C., & McLean, G. N. (1995). Team building in a public school system: An unsuccessful intervention. *Organization Development Journal*, 13(2), 1-12.