

*Original Article*

## A Study on Coaching to Develop School Principals' Professional Competence as Reflective Practitioners

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This paper examines whether coaching for principals could develop their professional competence as reflective practitioners. 'Educational support' for teachers was set as a key feature of the principals' professional competence. When they faced problems during educational support, they tried to find a solution. At that time, coaching was introduced to assist them to resolve the problem through reflective thinking. This author coached three principals in five sessions during 2007 and 2008. According to the analysis of the reflections in the coaching sessions, all three principals reframed their educational support view through 'reflection-on-action', and had solved their problems by reflective thinking of 'reflection-in-action' and 'deliberation'. As a result, it seems that coaching these principals had developed their professional competence in terms of enhanced educational support.

**Key Words:** Coaching, Reflective Practitioner, Principals' Professional Competence, Educational Support

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine whether coaching for principals could develop their professional competence as reflective practitioners.

The Ministry of Education issued the Central Education Council report titled, "What a local education administration should be in the future" [1]. It requires schools to be open to the regional community based on the philosophy of the "Establishment of autonomy and independence of schools" [1]. In order to manage schools autonomously, leadership from the school principal has become essential. Naturally, it is impossible to accomplish the goal of establishing new schools only through the principals. It is necessary for principals to organize teachers and to promote a collaborative system. So, how should principals support the

development of teachers in schools? Since the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Board of Education introduced an evaluation system in 2000 [2], almost all local boards of education have followed Tokyo. It has become a major role for principals to support the development of teachers.

Conversely, Schön originally proposed the concept of the "reflective practitioner" as a brand new professional model [3]. He insisted that a technical expert tended to apply rational rules to everyday situations, whereas a reflective practitioner tended to use situational learning and to adapt to various situations through reflective thinking. The professional competence of a reflective practitioner was defined by tacit knowledge and reflection. Sato pointed out the future need for teacher education to be modeled on the reflective practitioner in order to pursue individualistic and creative education instead of the technical expert model which teacher education had previously relied upon [4]. He prescribed that teachers' professional competence meant practical wisdom. This was in order to form a vital relationship with children and to represent the problem, as well

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as to find a solution and judge through reflection and deliberation [5]. Schön proposed the concept of 'supervision' to support teachers' reflection [6]. Supervision included coaching. As a result, coaching has been introduced to assist principals in this study.

## Professional Competence of Principals

### *Reflective Practitioner*

For a long time, the professional development of teachers and principals has relied on the technical expert model, which meant it was professional development by theory into practice. This was the technical rationale whereby teachers' professional competence would be improved by making a class using the instructional method and materials they had learned. However, since Schön presented the reflective practitioner model as a new professional image in 1983, it has attracted the attention of researchers and teachers [3]. What follows is a detailed examination of the reflective practitioner model.

From the 1980s, the trends of constructivism and social constructivism appeared as a new paradigm to replace logical positivism, such as behaviorism and cognitive science. Within this trend, although Schön did not study the case of teachers directly, he studied the professions of urban engineering, architecture, psychoanalysis and management consultancy [3, 7]. He proposed that the reflective practitioner model, based on reflection in the process of action, had replaced traditional the technical expert model on behalf of applying scientific and technological expertise. Schön said that the excellent practitioner would reflect on a problem by making full use of accumulated tacit knowledge from experience, and expanded reflective thinking by interacting with the situation by building peer-to-peer relationships with customers, solving the complex problems that occurred in such circumstances [3]. So, what kind of reflective thinking did Schön claim?

The source of the concept of reflection came from Dewey. Because of Dewey, reflection was one form of thinking that differed from positivism. [8]. When a person confronted a problematic situation, embarrassment and hesitation occurred initially. During the next stage, "inquiry" was implemented in order to resolve the problem. Finally the thinking

was accomplished by executing the judgment and the practice of problem-solving. He said that it was reflection which was thought to suspend the improvisational action. The process of reflection was the process of inquiry, which was to clarify what the problem was, and to analyze the goal, whether means were appropriate to form a hypothesis, and to verify practically. However, Schön indicated that Dewey did not clarify the differences in research methodology between natural sciences and daily practice. He tried to clarify the difference by presenting two new concepts concerning the relationship of thought and action, as well as theory and practice [9].

One of his concepts was 'knowing-in-action' [3]. The other was both 'reflection-in-action' [3] and "reflection-on-action [7]" which demonstrated the ways of thinking and the relationship of actions.

The former, knowing-in-action, was defined by tacit knowledge and embedded in to daily action, which appeared in action. Reflection-in-action was to think, judge and act momentarily, engaging with the situation. Reflection-on-action was to think about action consciously after that action. Schön indicated that the "frame" as a symbol of practice in action was important. Reframing would happen by comparing the new experience with prior experience.

Among Schön three concepts, the most important was reflection-in-action. Teachers' professional competence depended on how appropriately they could judge and act in the context of practice. However it was difficult to assist in developing professional competence by encouraging direct reflection-in-action, which was performed instantly in the mind of each teacher. Therefore, it became important to put emphasis on reflection-on-action after performance as well as reflection-in-action, and to develop professional competence by reframing. Sato said that deliberation was a thinking style to solve problems by modifying scientific theories and principles for the actual situation [5]. In this study, 'deliberation' was defined as a mode of thinking which teachers devised and used to modify scientific theories flexibly, depending on the context, when faced with problems and determined countermeasures.

### *Educational Support*

In principal leadership, the role of principals to support teachers' development in their schools was called "instructional leadership". The discussion

about instructional leadership compared with administrator style leadership and educational style leadership occurred between the 1950s and 1970s. However, since the 1980s, there has been little empirical research on instructional leadership [10]. The role of principals to support their teachers' professional development is an old topic for discussion which has recently become popular again within the issue of how to evaluate teachers. Therefore, the leadership of the principal in supporting teachers' development is examined in this study.

There have been many discussions about the role of principals. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the number of theories about principals' leadership is equal to the number of researchers who have been studying it. Previous research has examined the trust construction of principals [11], the relationship between work attitude and faculty leadership [12], the relationship between school improvement and leadership of the principal [13], and leadership of the principal from a psychological perspective [14].

In addition, among much discussion on the leadership of principals, Tsuyuguchi has arranged related research into six models [15]. At the top, educational leadership theory was presented. Although the definition of educational leadership was ambiguous and has not yet been established, "guidance and advice" for students and teachers has formed the core of educational leadership theory in Japan. It assumed that the role of principals to support teachers was the closest to "guidance and advice" among various models of leadership. However, the phrase "guidance and advice" does not equate to support. Therefore, the phrase "educational support" was adopted as one feature of principals' leadership to develop teachers' professional competence in this current study. So, educational support has been set as a standard for principals' professional competence. In other words, the aim of this paper is not to develop teachers' competence but to develop principals' professional competence as reflective practitioners.

## Coaching

When principals face problems during educational support, they might try to find solutions. At that time, coaching can be introduced to assist the principals to think by reflective thinking.

There are various approaches that can be taken from the disciplines of sports, business, management, medicine and others. Gallwey said, "Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching" [16]. In other words, through communication, coaching elicits the clients' motivation and encourages them to act.

Coaching, as well as mentoring, had been adapted to the education sector relatively early in the United States [17]. Skills such as coaching and mentoring were useful to build professional relationships at school [18]. Novice teachers played the role of client and skilled teachers played the part of the coach. Skilled teachers encouraged the novice teachers [19]. Conversely, leadership coaching attracted the attention of school administrators [20]. Therefore coaching was chosen as a strategy in this study.

## Practice of Coaching

### *Three Principals*

When I was a teachers' consultant in the Education Center, I assisted three principals by coaching to implement educational support for their teachers from 2007 to 2008. I had no experience as a principal, but I had communication skills for coaching. Since I attended an introductory course on business coaching in 2003, I had been trying to introduce coaching into education. I implemented the coaching workshop in the Education Center from 2004 to 2007, and was usually invited as an instructor of coaching to the workshops for principals and head teachers. So I had enough ability to implement coaching in this study.

Simple profiles of the three principals to be assisted were as follows:

Principal A: First year as a principal in an elementary school, male, 50's.

Principal B: Second year as a principal in a junior high school, male, 50's.

Principal C: First year as a principal in a special needs school, female, 50's.

### *Coaching Course*

The plan for the educational support and coaching is shown in Table 1. It was agreed to assist the three principals in April 2007, and the first meeting was held in the Education Center in July. At that time I coached principals based on the GROW model [21,

Table 1 The plan of the educational support and coaching

Meeting	Educational Support	Coaching
July 2007	Making polices for educational support	Assisting in making the policies based on the GROW model in the coaching session
November	Reflecting on the educational support	Assisting in encouraging reflection on the coaching session
March 2008		
July		
October		
November December	Interviews with the teachers in each school	

22] in order to assist creating policies for educational support for their teachers. After July they practiced the educational support in each school in line with the policy each principal had created. There were four coaching sessions, in November 2007, March, July, and October 2008. In the sessions, I coached using listening, approval, and questioning techniques and made an effort to foster an atmosphere of trust. In other words, I encouraged them to reflect on the educational support they provided their teachers by coaching. Finally, I visited each school and interviewed some of the teachers and confirmed data on the educational support collected from November to December.

#### ***Coaching based on the GROW Model***

At the first meeting I coached three principals based on the GROW model. All the conversations were transcribed. A transcript of the conversation between Principal A and myself is shown below.

Coach: After moving from your previous school to this school, what are the teachers like here? What did you think? And what kind of teachers do you expect them to become?

Principal A: This school is small, so I can talk to each teacher. I understand how teachers work. I feel that each teacher has strengths but that these are not evident in the organization as a whole. Recently our school was designated as a pilot school for English activities. I thought it is a good opportunity to form a powerful organization for the whole school.

Coach: What obstacles are there when you promote the research of English activities?

Principal A: Our school has not become accustomed to English activities yet, what do you say, they didn't know how to perform English activities. They didn't have an image of the class. It couldn't be helped because English activities haven't been practiced so much in integrated studies.

Coach: How are you going to have teachers become familiar with English activities?

Principal A: It is tough for me to help them to get an image of the class immediately. So far, I have continued to assess the status of the teachers carefully with support as needed. What I have to find is a way to provide essential information about English activities. I have a good friend who is an expert in English activities at another school. I think it is imperative to invite her to a school workshop.

Coach: What kind of support are you going to do otherwise?

Principal A: There is a homeroom teacher in fifth grade that is good at English activities. I am going to ask her to lead the school study next year. Because I like English, I've given her a CD which I bought for practicing English conversation. At that time, I asked her, "Would you lead English activities next year?" Her face lit up. Similarly, I am going to provide information about English activities, for example, newspapers for

Table 2 The purpose of utterances based on the GROW model

Underline	GROW model	Purpose
—————	Goal	Making a teacher model for all to realize
=====	Reality	Clarify the present situation of teachers
-----	Resource	How do you support teachers?
=====	Option	Show other methods to support
~~~~~	Will	Making clear principals' intention to support

Table 3 Policy of educational support

	Principal A	Principal B	Principal C
Goal	Teachers who participate in English activities as an organization	Teachers who cooperate with the after-school 'Club&salon'	Teachers who have professional training experience on special needs education
Reality	Teachers don't have a practical image of English activities	Teachers don't try new things	School workshops are not enough to foster professional ability
Resource	Asking an expert from another school to demonstrate a class	Asking the librarian to join the after-school Club&salon	There is an excellent teacher

teachers which I have issued monthly.

Coach: So, for the time-being, what you are going to do is to provide information on English activities to teachers and foster the homeroom teacher in the fifth grade, right?

Principal A: That's right. I don't intend to foster only one teacher, but through communication in various ways, I would like to strengthen the good points for all the teachers.

The purpose of the utterances based on the GROW model are shown in Table 2. Underlined statements correspond to the purpose.

As a result of coaching principals A, B and C a policy for educational support was created based on the GROW model, as shown in Table 3. (Due to the word limit for this journal the transcripts for the conversation with principals B and C have been omitted.)

## Analytical Methods

### Criteria

The purpose of this study is to examine whether coaching for principals could develop professional competence as reflective practitioners. Therefore what are the criteria to gauge whether professional competence has developed? One criteria would be whether the principals reframed their beliefs through 'reflection-on-action'. Another would be whether the principals have solved problems during educational support intervention by using reflective thinking of 'reflection-in-action' and 'deliberation'.

### Reframing

Professional competence as reflective practitioners appeared as numerous applications of 'reflection-in-action' to respond flexibly to unexpected problems that occur during educational support. However, it was hard to collect data directly during 'reflection-in-action'. Therefore principals were requested to make notes immediately after 'reflection-in-action'. I coached them to reflect on the notes they

made in the session and derived reflective thinking from them. Specifically, I asked them "Would you reflect about the educational support that was actually performed during the educational support? The note you recorded is available. And if an unexpected event or problem happened, please talk about it, and reflect on how you dealt with it." The reflection by coaching in August 2008 was named "reflection 1", and that in October "reflection 2". Differences were found by comparing reflection 1 and reflection 2. Professional competence was considered to have been formed by reframing.

### ***Problem-Solving***

In the first meeting principals made the policies for educational support. It was considered that the educational support had been planned based on the concepts and theory which was seen in previous studies, and experience of the support techniques that they had cultivated. However, when they actually performed the educational support in each school, they had changed or modified their concept depending on the actual conditions and situations of teachers. Therefore, the specific kinds of educational support actually provided to teachers changed or was modified from that chosen during the coaching session.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Reflection of the Three Principals***

In the sessions I asked three principals to look back on their problems and responses by reviewing their notes. I coached using coaching skills trying to create an atmosphere of trust. A summary of the reflection is as follows.

#### ***1. Reflection of Principal A***

Reflection 1 (July 2008)

Teacher D was a homeroom teacher of fifth grade until the last academic year. I withdrew her from that position and assigned her as a school research chief for this academic year. Because I expected her to concentrate on the research job, from the beginning of this year she has been working very energetically.

She is usually positive towards everything. However she can be a little aggressive. She really can do anything. So she also expects other teachers to do what she can do. A few days ago, she handed out the research program for the workshop to teachers in the staff meeting. The program included a proposal,

which said "All the staffs have to have a lesson to study English activities once a year with a lesson plan". The other teachers' reaction was "Oh!" and an uneasy atmosphere descended, "How can we really do that?" I will think deeply about what to do from now on.

As the summer vacation will start soon, we will have a school workshop during that time. I advised her "I have a friend who is very good at English activities. What do you think about inviting her to the school workshop and asking her to have a trial lesson this summer? If so, they will be able to have a specific image of an English activity class. She is so good that she understood very quickly when I gave her this information. However, other teachers can't follow her. It's hard for me to appear to be the leader all the time.

Reflection 2 (October 2008)

It was a good opportunity for teachers to join the trial lesson which the expert teacher of English activities demonstrated in the school workshop during the summer. She showed us the instruction methods and teaching materials, which were easy to use even for novice teachers. It helped them to form specific images of English activities. Around this time, teacher D began to listen well to what other teachers were saying. I found that the materials she provided became very easy to understand. A few days ago, I was surprised to hear that she proposed that all the staffs should go to see the open class. An open class of English activities has been planned in a nearby school. She said "It is a good opportunity to see an English class, so as many teachers as possible may join it." All the teachers took part in the open class. As a matter of fact, I mean the barrier to accepting this opportunity, the teachers' anxiety for the English activities, has been eliminated, what do you say, the teachers' confidence has appeared.

I think she has understood the importance of getting along with everyone by examining her experience as a chief of school study. They say "One step by one hundred people is better than one hundred steps of one person." I was also deeply impressed that it is tough to support a teacher who has leadership, but she is so good that she shouldn't over-reach herself and should be keenly aware of looking around and stepping forward with teachers together.

## ***2. Reflection of Principal B***

Reflection 1 (July 2008)

The after school Club&salon was a voluntary activity by students using break time or time after school. Initially, I proposed to try to do proactive activities with volunteer students. However, at first, it did not work at all. I was afraid no students would come to the first meeting but a few came. I didn't worry about the number of students, and decided to start something new anyway. The teachers also seemed to be looking at the situation initially. I couldn't quite obtain the teachers' cooperation, but I thought "I don't have to do anything except increase the number of teachers who will work together gradually."

Librarian E was good at working. She was usually careful at lending books to students and taking them back. It was easy for her to use word processor software and she published a library newspaper every month. One day I proposed she make a website. However, she answered "I've never used software to make a website." The idea did not go very well. It was obvious to her that I asked her to do additional work and would increase her workload. But I just asked, "It is enough to just suggest the idea of the design and layout of the homepage." After that, an assistant from the information technology and computer department began to come to school. So the assistant helped her to make the homepage step-by-step.

Reflection 2 (October 2008)

Librarian E began to make the homepage with a few students in the library after school. Then other students saw the work. Consequently some of them joined in. Moreover, they applied their work to a homepage competition, as a result of which they were able to win a prize although it was only their first attempt. The students who participated were pretty delighted, and the librarian looked happy. Since then the voluntary activity of making the homepage has continued in the after school Club&salon.

So, at first, she worried it might be an intrusion for the students to be taught by a librarian. However, this experience has changed her opinion. "I want to let more students join into make the homepage." I thought finding her strong point and just pressing her to get her going in the right direction certainly made her show her strengths and helped her to develop.

## ***3. Reflection of Principal C***

Reflection 1 (July 2008)

Our school is a large one of three faculties with more than 160 staff. The students' disabilities are also diverse. I feel as if there are three independent schools in one school. Therefore, I am going to develop teachers' individual professional abilities by activating the organization, which means opening lines of communication. One is principal-vice principal-head of faculty. Another is head of faculty-coordinator for each section-homeroom teacher. The other day, when I read the lesson plan, I noticed a descriptions of the current status of students, for example "... cannot do", "... it is difficult to do." I thought that although I always told staff in the meeting almost every morning to emphasis "the instruction to get close to the students", my intention has not been reflected in the teaching plan. So I picked up this issue in a liaison meeting. I assigned a summary assistant principal to help staff to reconsider their view of the students. After that, the descriptions of the lesson plans have changed significantly. However, I sometimes come across teaching in class and I still feel it is not enough for teachers simply to understand about disability. They also need expertise in special needs education.

Teacher F is a leader of school study. She is interested in autism education and usually buys books about it, goes out for teacher training meetings at the weekends and during the long holidays. She seems to be absorbed in self-development. She exudes happiness, is always smiling and has a bright cheerful personality. I assigned her to be the research chief this year because I expected that her positive attitude would promote teacher training much more by stimulating teachers' involved around her.

Reflection 2 (October 2008)

I worried about not having enough time to talk with teacher F carefully concerning school training, but it was unnecessary to take a lot of time to talk. The other day, when I passed her in the hallway, I asked her, "How are you going to advance school training?" During the brief conversation, we could talk about the direction of school training. I found she has her own view about teacher training.

I asked her "How can we give teachers who have moved from regular schools to a special needs school for the first time expertise in a short period of time?"

She answered that it is important to try everything with conviction. I agreed with her and encouraged her saying “I believe in you so much that I expect you to lead the school study with your extensive knowledge”. Speaking about school training, she energetically plans and manages workshops at school for training sessions concerning mastering knowledge and the treatment of a variety of disorders. I think her specialized abilities were utilized quite well.

In a large school like this, I was supposed to support individual teachers well using the lines of the organization, but still, both the use of the lines of communication and the communication with teachers itself will be important. I try to cherish the short communication I have with teachers, for example the conversations and tweets among teachers.

## Discussion

### 1. Reframing

Principal A assigned teacher D to be a chief of school study and expected her to provide leadership and elevate the general level of English activities at his school. However she was so good that other teachers couldn't keep up with her. The principal saw the problem and he became aware of the difficulties of leadership development. So, he introduced an expert teacher of English activities for a school workshop, and advised her to take the school study in the direction in which other teachers could have an image of English activities classes. In other words, he encouraged her to notice the importance of getting along with everyone. From the passage of his reflection, at first, he had a supportive view that attempted to develop leadership in the teacher he had specifically chosen for the job and expected her to lead all the teachers. However, after responding to the problem, he reframed his opinion on educational support to development of a collaborative organization to place the leader at the core.

Principal B asked a librarian to create a website to liven up the after school Club&salon. At first, it didn't progress on track, but in the wake of students' enthusiastic participation in making the website, she also started to make the homepage together. In a conversation with her, he knew that she thought “It might be obtrusive for the librarian to enter among the students and to teach them.” Therefore he realized

that it was important to eliminate her anxiety and to support her to elicit her strengths. By addressing the problem in this case, he realized the necessity of removing obstacles to existing views of educational support in order to take advantage of each teacher's strengths, and he reframed his view of educational support.

Principal C aimed to enhance teachers' professional abilities for special needs education in her school. She had the idea to use educational support to utilize the lines of communication within the organization and develop the leader of school study because her school faculty is large. She also usually talked about her thoughts in the morning meetings. She recognized her effort was paying off but she was wondering whether it was sufficient. In response to the problem in this case, she became aware of the importance of helping the individual, for example through short impromptu conversations. In addition, she was careful to give encouragement. From the text of her reflection, it is assumed that she reframed from her previous view using the lines of organization to create a new view adding the necessity to support by communicating and encouraging each individual.

### 2. Problem-Solving

Initially principal A was trying to foster leadership in the one teacher he had specially chosen for the task, but finally he thought that all the teachers should improve in English activities even if only in a small steps. Similarly, principal B changed direction to remove obstacles to utilize individual teacher's strengths. Likewise, Principal C added the new idea to communicate and encourage individually using lines of communication within the organization.

In this way, all three principals modified or changed their original support policies. This showed they had a rich and diverse repertoire of educational support techniques. Colton & Sparks-Langer constructed a framework for reflective teachers and represented the conscious processes of reflective thinking and decision-making among teachers [23]. They also indicated that expert teachers tended to make decisions to solve problems by comparing their 'professional knowledge base' derived from their years of teaching experience with information about the problematic situation. Thus far, it was considered that in the contexts where the three principals created



their educational support policies, they developed various support methods based on a rich professional knowledge base. Even where they provided educational support for teachers in each school they actually adapted the method of support based on existing professional knowledge and the specific problem encountered, and subsequently solved the problems.

### Research Findings

Based on the evaluation criteria, it was determined that the principals' professional competence had developed.

According to the analysis of the transformation of reflection that came to light in the coaching session, all three principals had reframed their view of educational support through 'reflection-on-action'. However, it is unclear whether they solved the problems during educational support by using reflective thinking of 'reflection-in-action' and 'deliberation'.

According to the analysis of the reflection in the coaching session, at first they had evaluated and solved the problem by drawing on relevant theory and prior experiences of support. Then, when the theory didn't work well, they modified it to fit situation, teacher and context. Thus all three principals may have solved their problems by reflective thinking of 'reflection-in-action' and 'deliberation'. Finally it seems clear that coaching for the principals has developed professional competence in educational support, which is one of principals' leadership roles as reflective practitioners.

As for areas of future research, two points are suggested. First, as it has been shown that coaching to assist principals was effective, the people who assist principals, for example educational board members and teachers' consultants in the Education Center should also have coaching skills. Second, since coaching could be effective not only for principals but also teachers, they should also be given training in coaching technique.

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