

Transcript of a (Role Played) Coaching Conversation

Scenario Background:

I've been working with this middle school teacher for six months. He's new to our school, but not new to teaching. He's struggled with management, making his lessons relevant to his students. On a number of occasions throughout the year he's made comments about, "these kids," and has suggested that their behavior is connected to their identities and where they come from. I've just observed him at the end of a class period screaming at his students about their lack of homework turn in.

Transcript	What Was I (Elena, as a the Coach) Thinking? <i>If you could have peeked inside my mind when I was in this conversation, this is what you would have heard.</i>
<p>Coach (C): Hi Manny.</p> <p>Teacher (T): Hi Elena.</p> <p>C: How are you?</p> <p>T: I'm still a little shaky from the period.</p> <p>C: It seemed like a difficult moment.</p> <p>T: Yeah, yeah, I mean. You saw. It's...I just don't know what to do about it.</p> <p>C: Is that what you want to talk about today? Did you have other things you want to talk about?</p> <p>T: Yeah, I think it would be good to get into it. Talk about that.</p> <p>C: We can spend our whole time on that if you want. Or was there anything else you want to check in on today?</p> <p>T: Ah, I do have to make some copies and do a little planning so if you can shorten that time a bit.</p> <p>C: Ok, so let's go for 50 minutes today and then you can have the last ten to do that.</p> <p>T: Ok.</p> <p>C: So do you want to tell me about what was going on?</p>	<p><i>I'm not sure how to best enroll Manny in this conversation. I'm not sure how to manage his emotions and want to be mindful that I'm not triggered by what he says.</i></p> <p><i>I wonder if he sees himself in that situation? Is he aware of how angry he might have seemed to kids? He seems to imply that the problem is the situation – "I don't know what to do about it." I write this phrase down as I may want to go back to it. I could also see if this is an entry point for me to be able to explore things to do.</i></p> <p><i>I need to give him choice about what we talk about. If he doesn't want to talk about this explosion now, we'll have to wait. Although I feel it needs to be addressed now. I feel that it's my responsibility to the kids who have to be with him. But I also know that I can't make him talk about it if he isn't ready. I always feel conflicted in these moments, but I'm learning to just be with my discomfort and not get uncomfortable by it.</i></p> <p><i>I want him to feel that he has choice throughout our conversations—adults have to feel like they have some say over their learning. I also want to make sure there isn't anything else he'd hoped to talk about. I sense that he's already feeling frustrated, disempowered in his classroom.</i></p> <p><i>He does this a lot – cut our meetings short. I'll give him ten minutes but I'm not going to cut off any more time.</i></p> <p><i>I want to open this topic as broadly as possible. I'm trying to be careful not</i></p>

T: Well, it's...you know. We've been going through this the whole year. It's March and you heard me. I have a 20% homework return rate and I've tried everything. I've made the homework easier. It's not about learning. It's about practice. Trying to build their academic habits. And I feel that I've taken all of the advice that everyone has given me and I still get the same homework return rate. I don't know what else there is to try. I mean, I feel like I've gone through this year and there's been a lot of blame on me from the administration. But it's you know, the kids just aren't doing the homework. I mean, you saw the homework. There's an opinion question and five multiplication questions. Why am I giving homework? And am I doing the wrong thing by not giving them homework? I've had that push back before.

C: Yeah, I hear you.

T: I'm just...[Sigh] It's upsetting.

C: Tell me a little bit more about the feelings that are coming up for you. "It's upsetting." What are the other feelings?

T: Well, I just don't see the point. Why give homework if I'm only going to get 20% return rate?

C: So is that feeling frustrated? Can you...? Can you use feeling words?

T: I'm frustrated, I'm disappointed. I feel hopeless. On another side of that I feel blamed. I feel like there's so much work around the teachers and I've crafted my assignments. I like I said, I've tried it X way and Z way and I don't know what else there is...What do I need to do next? Go from student home to student home and make sure they do their homework? It's crazy. It's too much.

C: Yeah and that's really hard because it sounds like...it sounds like you feel like you've tried everything you can and there's a lot out of your control.

T: Yeah, so what do we do with that?

C: Well, I just want to back track for a few minutes. What's your memory of what I observed when I came into your class this afternoon?

T: I think I was...I was just kind of going off on the whole

to impose my judgment that he was wrong, or acting inappropriately.

He seems to place all responsibility for what's going on with the kids. I wonder what he feels is his responsibility. But I can also hear so much emotion in his voice and words—I don't think he's ready to think about how kids experience him, or what power he does have in the classroom.

I need to just validate, just show that I heard what he said. I am also feeling a little triggered by him—I feel a little frustrated that he's back to externalizing blame, that he doesn't see that he can't yell at kids. I want him to see his part in this! I need to keep reaching for my empathy for him because as soon as I lose touch with my empathy, I don't think I'll be effective.

I'm thinking about the Lens of Emotional Intelligence. I'm wondering whether he's aware of how he expresses his emotions. I also sense that it might be helpful for him to name some of the feelings—you can't manage emotions until you recognize that you're having them.

His response doesn't name feelings. I want to encourage him to name them. It's a way to develop awareness so that you can make a choice about how you respond to them. I think this might be a "gap"—in that I'm not sure if he can name them.

He can name a lot of feelings. It sounds like he feels that a lot of this is outside of his sphere of influence. I feel for him though—I recognize my own empathy getting stronger.

I need to validate and communicate my empathy.

I register this, "What do we do with that?" And am mentally flagging it as an invitation for me to offer a suggestion. I jot down that phrase. I am not sure he can "solve" this problem himself—or even manage it. So I might get directive and make a suggestion. But I feel like before we get to problem solving I want to return to how he showed up with his class—because he was scary. I feel like I need to make sure he recognizes his behavior. And I really need to understand how he experienced it, from his perspective. His perception is his reality. I share a different perception. Mine isn't right or better. I need to know what his is.

class a little bit and saying that you know, it's horrible that we have a 20% return rate. That that's not ok. That what is happening... And I did say for most of us, trying to still validate the 20%, it was just not ok.

C: So if you can imagine...Looking kind of, hovering over your classroom and having looked down at you in that moment, can you tell me a little bit more about what you would see.

T: So if I was a fly on the wall? Looking at my own room. I would see a frustrated teacher who was working his ass off and I would see students...

C: Wait, can you hold on for one second, because if you were a fly, you wouldn't be able to interpret and say that's a frustrated teacher. Can you just tell me what the fly would see? What would be a little bit more of the less interpretive?

T: Well a fly would see 32 teachers actually with...

C: 32 teachers?

T: Because of their eyes.

C: Oh, ok.

T: Well, a fly would see me speaking loudly to my class. For a brief moment the fly would see students quiet, but at the same time a fly would also see some students kind of snickering a little bit on the side.

C: So you know, it's interesting, because you remember saying it's horrible that there's a 20% return rate. Can I tell you what I heard? It was different.

T: Ok, that's what I remember saying, wanting to say.

C: Ok. Because I heard you say, "It's horrible that we have a 20% return rate. You guys are horrible."

I am not sure he's aware of how he was behaving.

Maybe my question wasn't clear. He's so consumed by his own emotional experience he can't see how he's experienced by others.

I'm going to try shifting this way from him and me—to a "third point"—an outside observer's perspective. We might need a little distance like this in our conversation.

This comment makes me hopeful—it's a shift in his energy. He laughs. This is good. I laugh. There's a tiny bit more lightness in our conversation.

"Speaking loudly." I wonder if he thinks about the impact on kids. I would have said he was "screaming." We perceive this behavior differently. But in some ways it's not about the term or label, it's about the consequences—intended and unintended. For a moment I have a flicker of empathy for the kids again—for how they might have felt as their teacher screamed at them. I would never want my own child in a class with a teacher who speaks to them in this way. He shifts so fast from himself to his students—and to the ones who are "snickering." I don't think he's able to see himself in this situation. If he can't see himself he can't take responsibility for his actions.

I'm going to take a risk. I feel like I need to be confrontational at this point and push the "data" in front of him. I hope I can do this in a compassionate way. I hope to just put this on the table.

I also understand that sometime when we're in the midst of an intense emotion (such as anger) we're less aware of what we say. We might not be aware of how we're acting or what we're saying. I think I need to tell him.

Ah. That's what he "wanted to say." Maybe there's a crack there—maybe he has a sense that that's not what he said. He might get defensive when I share this...or maybe not.

I try to say this in a neutral tone—not mimicking the tone he used, or with

the volume or pacing of the words, but just saying the words with little expression. I'm nervous. I'm bringing a lot of awareness right now to my nonverbal communication—I want to make sure that neither my tone of voice nor body language communicate some of my underlying feelings (of anger, frustration, disapproval in the way he behaved). I want to make sure that I'm communicating my underlying compassion for him. I know that he's really struggled and that he's frustrated. I remember the phrase from the Lens of Compassion, "something wholesome and good exists within all of us." Just because I can't see it right now doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. I flash back to a moment earlier in the year when I saw him working with a small group of students in a way that was so positive, encouraging, and passionate about the content. This flashback helps me remember his assets.

This is hopeful. That he's not defensive. I don't want to keep going with what he said because I want to just let that sink in for him. Let him process it and not put him on the spot.

By framing this as "the fly's observation" it's again removing this from me and him and to a third point—that small amount of distance helps, I think, to share this difficult observation. It's subtle, but it would be different (maybe in a not good way) if I said, "Your face was so red and you were waving your hands around." I want to share these data points—that his message is delivered also through his body—because this could be a way (if he wants) for us to address his management of emotions—I'm not sure he's aware that he's angry, or as angry as he seems—and so helping him develop awareness of his physical experience might be an entry point.

Ok, so "that's true" makes me think he has some awareness. His statement, "I'm pretty conscientious about that" makes me think he has some awareness in that moment, but that he doesn't want to be expressing such anger—that his behavior was out of alignment with some element of his intentions with how he wants to be as a teacher or his vision for himself. I can "use" this! I might go back to this phrase "pretty conscientious about that." If we dig deeper into his emotions—which we might need to because he can't be exploding in anger like that with his kids! It's just not fair to them.

I think I need to get some more understanding of how he hears this, however. Does he see this lack of alignment? I should be careful not to leap to assumptions about his reflections.

Ah. This is useful for me to hear. I interpret this that he's not yet in a place where he can reflect on his actions because he goes so quickly from himself to external factors—me, the principal, AP. And then back to the kids. I think about the Lens of Inquiry—and who is determining the problem. He sees the problem as the kids. I see it as his emotional intelligence. But given that he's not seeing it as I see it, there's no point right now in continuing down that path. I think I'll see what happens if we explore kid behavior.

But I'm also having some uncomfortable feelings right now because one of my triggers is when people don't take responsibility for themselves and their actions, when they blame others, and especially, when they blame kids. Because I'm feeling a little annoyed I am going to say something to give me

T: Did I say that? You guys are horrible?

C: Yeah. And I also noticed, when you said the fly would see you speaking loudly with moments of quiet from the students, I also think the fly might have seen how red your face was and how your hands were really gesticulating and you were really moving around. That may not have been something you noticed.

T: Yeah, that's true. I get red and I use my hands, that's true. I don't remember saying they were horrible because I'm pretty conscientious about that. But if you say you heard that then I guess I said it.

C: How does that sound to hear that that's what I heard or there's a possibility...?

T: I mean it doesn't feel good. But again, we're coming back, see like this is what happens. I get in these conversations with you or my principal or assistant principal and it comes back to be about what I'm saying when we really should be talking about the kids who aren't doing their homework.

C: Yeah, and that seems like that would be frustrating.

T: Yeah, what are we doing when we're all the teachers talking to each other about teaching when we could be talking about kids and why they're not doing their stuff.

C: I wonder though if there's...I just wonder if there's any, other possible emotional responses to them not turning in their homework that might be...

T: I don't know what's left. I don't want to accept that kind of defeat and I feel like that's it. If I'm not upset about a 20% return rate then I feel like I'm just letting the status quo continue and I'll just have low expectations. That's not okay with me.

C: So is that coming from a commitment to your students?

T: Yeah, I mean I want them to learn and do their homework and do well in life and have options. All that.

C: So if that's your hopes for them, if that's what you're trying to help them be able to reach, can you help me understand for you what's the connection between them turning in their homework and that outcome? How do you see that?

T: Well, I think that if they would be good students and practice being good students now they'll be good students through high school and they'll get to college. I think it's about habits and like I said, I've done everything. Taken all the suggestions and I'm getting the

a moment to get back on track. I also think I should validate the underlying emotion here—which is of feeling powerless. That's often a useful way of creating a moment of space for myself and it's genuine.

He doesn't seem to see the connection between his teaching and kid behavior. I don't hear any awareness of how his relationship with kids (which right now seems like a power struggle) impacts what they do. He seems to feel powerless and doesn't recognize that he's wielding power by exploding in anger. I'm thinking a lot about the Spheres of Influence and Control in order to get a sense of what he thinks he can control.

I want to be somewhat confrontational. I'm not ready to let this go—this connection between the way he treats kids and their behavior, or that it's just okay for him to scream at kids. I wonder also, genuinely, whether he sees any other way to respond.

This helps me see that he really doesn't have many strategies to manage his emotions. His use of the term "defeat" is also interesting—as if he's in a battle. He's looking at things in a binary way, we may need to shift the whole paradigm. Take this homework thing out of the way so that he can see who they are, what they can do, so that he can see his own emotions. And then there's this "low expectations" reference. We're in a context where there's lots of discussion about expectations, we're expected to have high expectations—but I think that we've never as a school really unpacked what we mean by "high expectations." This reflects an aspect of our staff culture that probably needs to be addressed soon—it's a "systems issue" about organizational culture.

I think I need to shift this perception—help him see a different way of looking at things. This is a way to "walk him down the ladder of inference." I'm going to suggest that his actions might be coming from his concern for his kids—as a way to get him back focused on what they need. Wake up the part of him that wants to see students succeed.

Ok, good. He's back here where I hoped he'd get to. His intentions for his kids. Shift the focus from his frustration to his students' needs.

I want to understand his thinking better so that I can help him develop awareness of his decision-making.

Ok, so he wants to develop habits. I'm going to focus on his intention and not what hasn't worked.

<p>results that I'm getting in March.</p> <p>C: Well, you're right, they are really important habits that they need to develop in order to get those possibilities. What other things do you think you do that are helping them develop the kinds of habits that you think they need for college and career?</p> <p>T: Well, I think just my general teaching is forming good habits for them. They know how to take notes during a lecture and when it's work time they need to learn how to work together.</p> <p>C: So on taking notes, is that a habit you've been teaching them?</p> <p>T: Yeah, we do notes for a chunk of the period almost every day.</p> <p>C: And what is the percentage of students who are able to do that?</p> <p>T: I think pretty decent. The last grading reports came out and it's kind of feast or famine on my grades. I got a bunch of As and Bs maybe half and a bunch of Ds and Fs, very few Cs.</p> <p>C: But can they take notes during class? Are they all taking notes?</p> <p>T: For the most part. Either they're taking notes or they're not doing anything, they're not bothering anyone. Which right now I'm going to accept.</p> <p>C: So what percentage do you think are taking notes?</p> <p>T: Probably two-thirds.</p> <p>C: What percentage are capable of taking notes but might be opting out?</p> <p>T: I think everyone else who is not taking notes is opting out.</p> <p>C: So they <i>could</i>?</p> <p>T: They could.</p>	<p><i>I want to guide him to his sphere of control. I also want him to recall and recognize moments when he is successful—as well as when the kids are successful.</i></p> <p><i>Note taking! Something concrete, observable, doable for all. It's not a super high leverage instructional strategy (not the way I've seen him do it) but it's something. Right now I need any possible entry point.</i></p> <p><i>I want to remind him that he needs to teach skills. Not just ask them to implement a skill set. By framing my question like this I'm implying that he needs to teach them.</i></p> <p><i>He doesn't seem to have heard the distinction between "teach" and "do" but that's ok.</i></p> <p><i>I want him to see that his kids can do something if it's structured, guided, within class time. He is struggling to see what they can do. This is so concrete.</i></p> <p><i>Interesting that he jumps to grades. I wonder if he knows whether his kids can take notes—can they do this discrete skill? So I'll just ask.</i></p> <p><i>So much deficit language used about kids...I remind myself that this is also a trigger for me and I'm going to ignore it. I want him to see that his kids can do something. That the great majority of them are not only capable but are usually on task.</i></p> <p><i>That's a lot. That's good. I'm going to keep going.</i></p> <p><i>I want him to start holding this distinction in mind—that there's a difference between skill and will.</i></p> <p><i>That's a lot of kids then who are capable of doing something and he's not tapping their ability. I want him to have an experience of being able to see</i></p>
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C: I think, you know it would be really interesting for us to think more about this idea of the habits and see which ones you're already doing in class that they're already able to do or that they're opting out of. So that we can distinguish a bit between is the inability to do homework because they're unable to do the habit or is something else going on. So I want to make a suggestion. Because I really hear your commitment to students and to them having options in their future. And I see the place that you go emotionally around homework. I think that one gets cloudy and I'm not sure it's bringing out your best teacher, the best parts of you, the parts of you that can help these kids.

So I want to make a suggestion, I want to encourage you to try something for just two weeks. And I'm happy to communicate this to other people who might question this. I want to actually suggest that you don't give homework for two weeks and that we look at the habits that they are using and practicing and learning in class to get a better—you know you're a science teacher, what's the controllable and the not controllable stuff in science? So we're going to do an experiment with the control group—this is what we can control in the classroom. And we're going to see what can happen, what are they capable of doing in terms of learning a habit and practicing it while they're with in your control or space. And we're going to let go of homework for two weeks. Are you willing to try that?

T: As long as you get clearance from my principals that I can not give homework for two weeks.

C: Ok, I will take responsibility for doing that.

T: Alright! No homework for two weeks!

C: How does that sound?

T: You know, there's a part of me that's relieved and then there's a part of me that's really, we're going to give these kids no homework for two weeks?

C: Well, everything else you've tried hasn't worked, right?

T: That's true.

C: So let's just do something...try something else. Just keep trying different things, and see what happens, see how it affects you, your relationship with students. I'm just going to ask you to go into this with an open mind. That's all. I know that it's been really hard and you're

their abilities. He's become myopic, seeing only their bad behavior. I think we need to interrupt this mental pathway, this story, his interpretation of their behavior. I want to remove the homework issue entirely from the equation.

I want to remind him of his commitment, whenever I can.

I want to remind him of how scientists problem solve—by doing experiments. By being open.

I want to offer this in a way that might be slightly confrontational—because I want him to do this. I am going to be intentionally directive and nudge him strongly to do this. I think that his beliefs won't shift until he starts changing his behavior and seeing different behavior from the kids. I want to emphasize his "willingness" because I think he'll be receptive to this phrasing.

The tone of his voice when he says this is so dismissive of the kids—"these kids". I'm not going to respond to this—it almost feels provocative, like he's trying to bait me.

I need to be confrontational. I want to remind him that it's what "he's tried." The responsibility is on him.

Again, I want to be confrontational—"I'm going to ask you..." And then validate the emotions. And ask him to try again. Remind him about his will.

I want to push him through some new actions and then much later we'll come back to his beliefs. And how they change—if they do. I hear his "one

frustrated and you're tired. And I'm going to ask you one more time.

T: Ok, try one more thing. Alright. I'll have less grading to do.

C: Yeah, that's true.

more thing," as not really believing that this will make any difference, that he's truly powerless and it's all the kid's fault, but I'm going to push forward with this strategy so that we can find some brief moments of "bright spots" in the kids. This is coming from a change management approach—to "point to the destination," "shrink the change," and "find the bright spots."

And it's good that he ends on this – "less grading"—he's found a personal bonus.