

## GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR: EXAMINING MATHEMATICS COACHES' STRATEGIES FOR GAINING ACCESS TO CLASSROOMS

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Mathematics coaches are called upon to provide productive, job-embedded professional development for teachers (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017), but their capacity to do so hinges on gaining access to classrooms. Even in schools or districts where coaching is pervasive, teachers are under no obligation to participating in coaching and often have autonomy about whether, when, and for what they invite coaches into their classrooms to do joint work (Saclarides & Lubienski, 2020). Much of what we know about access comes from skilled practitioners (Killion, 2008, Knight, 2017) and a modest body of empirical research (Hartmann, 2013; Mangin, 2005), both of which point to the challenges and importance of gaining access. This study asks: What strategies to elementary mathematics coaches draw upon and enact when negotiating access to teachers' classrooms? What relationships exist between these strategies?

Eleven full-time, school-based elementary mathematics coaches in a public school district located in a southeastern, metropolitan area of the United States were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. All statements that described strategies, or action the coach took to gain access to classrooms, were identified and inductively coded to describe the nature of the strategy. Strategies were counted for each coach as either present or absent and then clustered into larger categories based on related functions through an iterative process. Last, statements in which multiple strategies were discussed in tandem were used to create a model for how coaches coordinated strategies to gain access.

Mathematics coaches reported 33 distinct strategies for gaining access to classrooms, with each coach reporting 10 – 20 strategies (median=13). These strategies spanned two related tiers. In the first tier, all coaches engaged in *relational* and *structural strategies* to position themselves and their coaching work as embedded in school routines, creating conditions to move into classrooms. In the second tier, coaches drew from four strategy types (*pitching in*, *cloaked coaching strategies*, *indirect strategies*, *direct offers*) to gain physical access to classrooms. The strategies in this second tier varied in their directness. While direct offers were open invitations to coaching, other types offered non-coaching assistance in the classroom, engaged teachers in coaching while avoiding directly describing the coach's intent, or created opportunities for teachers to approach coaches. These less direct strategies enabled access when coaches perceived that direct offers would be rejected. Coaches deliberately selected the types of strategies they used with different teachers, based on their perceptions of teachers' dispositions and experience.

Gaining access was found to be complex work for all coaches interviewed, requiring a suite of well-coordinated strategies. Future research might investigate whether and how gaining access for mathematics coaching, particularly in the elementary grades studied here, might require different types of strategies from coaching in other disciplines.

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