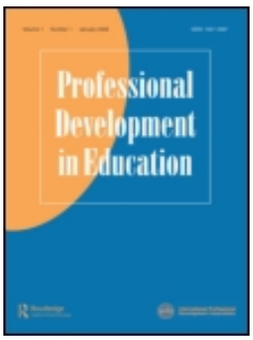

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of In-Service Education

ISSN: 1367-4587 (Print) 1747-5082 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjie19

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To cite this article: Christopher Rhodes & Sandra Beneicke (2002) Coaching, mentoring and peer-networking: challenges for the management of teacher professional development in schools, Journal of In-Service Education, 28:2, 297-310

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13674580200200184

Coaching, Mentoring and Peer-networking: challenges for the management of teacher professional development in schools

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ABSTRACT School performance and school improvement are in the spotlight. A plethora of policy driven initiatives including the prescription of standards, enhanced self-management opportunities, organisational restructuring, professional development of staff and statutory interventions, such as literacy development, have underlain the pressure and support offered by government to raise standards in schools. Coaching, mentoring and peer-network mechanisms, which have had prevalence outside education, are being seen as important within education as a means of assisting the raising of standards and attainment. This article concerns itself with the use of coaching, mentoring and peer-network mechanisms in schools as a means to enhance professional development, embed changed practice and encourage the transmission of teacher learning to pupil learning within classrooms. The potential benefits of the deployment of such mechanisms within schools are reviewed, and the article highlights management issues within schools likely to emerge should individual schools adopt or give additional prominence to the use of such mechanisms as a means to enhance professional development.

Introduction

The newly-emergent national strategy for continuing professional development in the United Kingdom (see DfEE, 2001a) strongly advocates the use of coaching, mentoring and peer-networking mechanisms to enhance teacher professional development and performance in schools. It suggests that mutual support for learning, the dissemination of good practices, the translation of teacher learning to pupil learning and the embedding of desirable change are among the potential benefits to be realised from the adoption of such mechanisms (see DfEE, 2001a,b,c;

Harrison, 2001). However, the encouragement of teacher collaboration and mutual support in professional development is not new. For example, peer coaching has been a feature of teacher professional development in the United States for many years, and has been seen as a means to effect and embed lasting improvements in professional practice (see Shalaway, 1985; Swafford et al, 1997; Swafford, 1998). Peer-coaching within the United States has been defined by Robbins (1995) as:

> *a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect upon current practices; expand, refine and build new skills; share ideas; conduct action research; teach one another, or problem solve within the workplace.*

The use of coaching to support teachers in improving their practice has also been explored in Holland. Veenman (1995) and Veenman et al (1998a,b) have studied the effect of coaching skills training on the efficacy of school counsellors, primary school teachers and school principals as coaches of teachers. Taking coaching as a form of in-class support used to provide teachers with feedback on their own practice as a means to stimulate self-reflection, it was found that coaching was generally perceived as positive by teachers, with the potential to improve professional practice.

In the United Kingdom, the drive to improve all schools has been well documented (see Blunkett, 1999; Docking, 2000). Given that effective teachers are key determinants of successful pupil learning, it is not surprising that government initiatives have been directed at the management of teachers' performance and at supporting them in their professional development. It is now widely accepted that effective professional development of staff within schools is essential if the United Kingdom national targets of creating more effective schools and raising the standards of pupil achievement are to be realised (see Kydd et al, 1997; O'Brien & Macbeath, 1999; Moon, 2000). The new national strategy for continuing professional development draws upon the work of Joyce & Showers (1988) and Oldroyd & Hall (1988), which shows that engagement of coaching assists the translation of training into increased impact on job performance.

More recent studies have explored peer-group collaboration and support as agents in raising teacher performance. For example, Smith (1999) reviewed the emergence of action-orientated 'peer support groups' as part of school-based professional development, and argued the importance of self-critical communities of teachers within schools aided by the establishment of a climate that is conducive to self-review and learning. In a study of secondary school teachers in Canada, Beatty (2000) suggested that collaborative reflection in teacher study groups may

represent a powerful catalyst to professional growth, and thus to the development of learning communities and organisational transformation.

Against a background of increasing uncertainty regarding the efficacy of attending unsupported external courses as a means to raise performance and effect sustainable change (see Swafford, 1998; Rhodes & Houghton-Hill, 2000; Walker & Stott, 2000), and guided by emergent research and national strategy, school management teams in the United Kingdom are now invited to consider the adoption of professional development activities which embrace the mutual teacher support implicit in coaching, mentoring and peer-networking relationships (see DfEE, 2001a,b,c; Harrison, 2001). However, implementation of such mechanisms and the creation of an environment in which mutual support can flourish may present challenges within some schools. For example, West-Burnham & O'Sullivan (1998) highlight the need for high-quality personal and interpersonal skills, mutual trust, confidence and respect within successful coaching relationships. However, it is known that collaboration between individuals so they can work and learn together is not prevalent in many schools (see Harris, 2001).

Given the growing interest in coaching, mentoring and peer-networking as means to enhance professional development in schools, the challenges associated with the successful management of these mechanisms warrants further attention. This is particularly so in view of the potential benefits suggested with respect to raising teacher and organisational performance within a climate of collaboration, respect and mutual trust.

A Growing Interest in Coaching, Mentoring and Peer-networking within the United Kingdom

The new national strategy for continuing professional development emphasises the importance of teachers learning with and from other teachers, the importance of school support in improving teacher practices as a result of professional development and the encouragement of schools to become professional learning communities.

A recent DfEE publication, *Learning and Teaching: a strategy for professional development* (DfEE, 2001a) suggests that professional development is most likely to lead to successful changes in teachers' practice where development involves, amongst other elements:

> *coaching and feedback on their professional practice over a period of weeks and months. This is a particularly important element, and can be decisive in determining whether changes in practice survive.*

The importance of teacher mutual support is also echoed in the current code of practice for providers of professional development for teachers (DfEE, 2001b):

> *Professional development for teachers and those who work with them in schools has been changing dramatically over recent years. Much of it comes from the support colleagues provide for each other formally and informally. Equally, planned development is needed for individuals, departments and whole schools to improve the quality of education. This too may be in the form of collegial learning within schools.*

In addition, the Green Paper, *Schools: Building on Success* (DfEE, 2001c) suggests:

> *Successful schools are always outward facing and committed to sharing best practice and seeking innovative thinking wherever they can find it. This vital process of networking and sharing knowledge is at the heart of teachers' professionalism because it involves both learning from what works and contributing to the pool of professional knowledge. We will continue to emphasise the value that can come from teachers learning from each other – through observing lessons, feedback, coaching and mentoring – which many teachers find the most effective way to improve their practice.*

In seeking to establish the nature, benefits and demands of coaching, mentoring and peer-networking, it is appropriate to examine both business as well as educational literature sources, as these mechanisms have frequently found prominence within the corporate learning armoury.

The Nature of Coaching, Mentoring and Peer-networking

In the United Kingdom, mentoring already constitutes a familiar educational term within the context of the support offered to newly qualified teachers by more experienced colleagues (see TTA, 2001). However, there is presently little training available to support the work of the coach or mentor within schools as framed by the national strategy for continuing professional development (Harrison, 2001). Given that these mechanisms have frequently found prominence within the corporate business learning environment, it is pertinent to draw upon such business usage in seeking to explore coaching, mentoring and peer-networking relationships. Professional development in some companies has drawn heavily on the development of openness, partnership and trust between individuals through the use of coaching (see Whitmore, 1995; Barker, 1998; Skiffington & Zeus, 2000) and mentoring (see Parsloe, 1992; Beaumont, 1994; Parsloe & Wray, 2000) relationships. However, despite

their established position within corporate learning, there are no commonly held definitions of coaching or mentoring. For example:

> *Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them. (Whitmore, 1995)*
>
> *Coaching is a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve. (Parsloe & Wray, 2000)*
>
> *Coaching is the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another. (Downey, 2001)*
>
> *A mentor is a more experienced individual willing to share their knowledge with someone less experienced in a relationship of mutual trust. A mixture of parent and peer, the mentor's primary function is to be a transitional figure in an individual's development. Mentoring includes coaching, facilitating, counselling and networking. (Clutterbuck, 1991)*
>
> *Mentoring is a role which includes coaching, but also embraces broader counselling and support, such as career counselling, privileged access to information, etc. (Landsberg, 1996)*

Drawing on these definitions, it is suggested that both coaching and mentoring are complex activities deeply associated with the support of individual learning. Mentoring implies an extended relationship involving additional behaviour such as counselling and professional friendship (see Gardiner, 1998). Peer-networking may be taken as a generic term to encompass two or more individuals working together to enhance information exchange, dissemination of good practices, and the organisation of mutual support and learning. Such networking may occur between individuals or groups within individual schools or in collaboration with other schools.

The Potential Benefits of Coaching, Mentoring and Peer-networking

Despite a paucity of teacher collaboration in many schools (see Harris, 2001), the encouragement of close partnerships between colleagues may help reduce or overcome any non-collaborative Balkanisation within individual schools (see Beatty, 2000) and yield some or all of the following benefits:

- Although the encouragement of teacher collaboration may be viewed as the administrative fostering of a contrived collegiality to gain uncritical compliance to change on the part of individual teachers (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990), the encouragement of collaboration may

also be viewed as a tool of teacher empowerment. For example, Lieberman & Miller (2000) have suggested that teachers may well experience enhanced confidence and self-esteem through the mutual support offered by other colleagues.

- The engagement of support using coaching, mentoring and networking activities may assist in the transfer of teacher learning to pupil learning, resulting in greater impact within the classroom experience of pupils and the increased potential to raise standards and attainment (see Joyce & Showers, 1988; Oldroyd & Hall, 1988; Wallace, 1996; Swafford, 1998; Rhodes & Houghton-Hill, 2000).
- The locus of control of professional development may change beneficially, allowing teachers greater ownership of professional development and its potential impact, rather than professional development and change being seen as an imposition by others (see Whitmore, 1995; Beatty, 2000; Downey, 2001).
- Enhanced individual, team and school performance may emerge by sharing and developing practice within an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, both on a local and wider basis through a dissemination of good practices and emerging principles (see DfEE, 2001a,b,c).

Challenges for the Management of Professional Development in Schools

Close partnership between colleagues is an important factor in enabling coaching, mentoring and peer-networking to flourish. In schools where collaboration and trust between individuals is weak or not established, approaches to professional development and performance management, which embrace these mechanisms, have implications for management teams in those schools. Management teams need to devise strategies to facilitate closer working relationships between colleagues so that trust and mutual support can develop. Other important management issues relate to the acquisition and use of information and training, the careful selection of individuals as coaches and mentors, engaging staff commitment to a management style that incorporates coaching, mentoring and peer-networking, the use of accurate needs analysis as a pre-requisite to deploying support and staff time constraints.

Teacher Collaboration

The potential benefits of coaching, mentoring and peer-networking activities within schools stem from the requirement for close partnership between colleagues within an environment of trust, safety, support and mutual respect (see Ponzio, 1987; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; West-Burnham & O'Sullivan, 1998, Harris, 2000, 2001; Thompson, 2001). Notwithstanding the caution urged by Hargreaves & Dawe (1990) concerning contrived collegiality, performance management procedures

and the national strategy for continuing professional development invites school management teams to facilitate teacher learning by fostering the conditions in which such learning can take place along with attendant benefits for pupil learning and attainment. A study by Law & Glover (1996) established open networking, which facilitated mutual support and reflection, to be an important element in the effective management of professional development within schools. However, along with schools that manage their professional development culture well, a wide diversity of management and leadership styles exist in schools and this influences the management of professional development (Law, 1997). It has been established that teacher collaboration is necessary for professional learning to occur (see Harris, 2000). Management teams need to consider how productive collaboration may be engendered within the context of their individual schools.

Information and Training

The paucity of information currently available to schools in the United Kingdom concerning implementation issues, desirable working standards and the skill and training requirements of staff responsible for helping colleagues learn, needs to be addressed if the potential benefits of these mechanisms are to be realised. Although much attention has been paid to the needs of staff charged with mentoring newly qualified teachers (see Bleach, 2000; Hayes, 2000), there is little training to guide the work of the coach or mentor working to support the learning of the more experienced within schools (see Harrison, 2001). Drawing on a survey of teachers undertaken following performance threshold assessment, Thompson (2001) reported that one-third of respondents did not identify their team leader as being good at coaching and developing them. In addition, one-fifth said that the team leader did not take a close interest in their professional development. This is worrying, as team leaders in all schools, whether subject to performance threshold standards or not, have an important role in assisting teachers to raise their performance. Debate concerning the raising of standards and attainment is not restricted to the United Kingdom. Therefore, national or international agreement on guidance concerning good practices in coaching, mentoring and peer-networking would be of use to both teachers, management teams, trainers and others concerned with the raising of standards and attainment in schools.

Selection of Individuals

It is incumbent upon school management teams to select individuals to act as coach-mentors who possess personal and professional qualities of the highest order (see West-Burnham & O'Sullivan, 1998). For example,

insensitive and judgmental feedback regarding performance can damage learning relationships and encourage teachers to have negative views of their own abilities that, in turn, could lead to lower standards (Watkins & Whalley, 2001). In offering feedback coach-mentors have the potential to go beyond the instrumental level of mechanistic direction for colleagues and would ideally offer the opportunity to reflect deeply on practice. Thompson (2001) has suggested that coaching without reflection will not enable learning to take place and West-Burnham & O'Sullivan (1998) point out that both coaching and reflection are required in order to produce a consolidated and internalised learning experience. Coach-mentors in schools are responsible for assisting the learning of colleagues who are adults and with this goes the requirement for management teams to choose and train individuals who can sustain skills in enabling adults to learn. For example, Collarbone (2000) has identified that coaching requires the recognition that adults learn for specific purposes and that they must be motivated to want to learn. Discussing the mentoring of adults, Daloz (1998) identifies potential problems that may damage intended learning relationships between colleagues. It is suggested that problems could stem from differing ethics, possible misuse of power or excessive control by the mentor, or from exaggerated emotional dependence by either party. Management teams need to consider the preparedness of coach-mentors in understanding and executing their role in supporting the learning of colleagues effectively.

Engaging Staff Commitment

Any approach to professional development that ignores the issue of who is in control of the development is missing a vital component. Higgins & Leat (1997) point out that it is important to recognise that people are less likely to be receptive or positive with regard to professional development initiatives if they think they are being manipulated. Management teams need to consider how they will convince staff of the potential benefits of a management style that involves coaching, mentoring and peer-networking. For example, if the work of the coach-mentor becomes equated with only supervision due to weakness, staff may perceive an over managerialist element, rather than a true collegial drive to support the learning of all teachers.

Needs Analysis

In seeking to enhance the performance of teachers by engaging coaching, mentoring or networking activities, management teams will need to carefully identify the teacher learning needs which truly need to be met in order to raise standards and attainment within their schools. For example, an accurate diagnosis of the causes of any poor performance

would enable better targeting of support offered and thus provide the potential for a more effective and efficient remediation to take place. This is perhaps best illustrated by the work of Wragg (2000), who found that where poorly performing teachers did improve their performance, it was often because they had been given in-house support and a fellow teacher as mentor, which in turn had made an impact on their classroom teaching. Importantly, headteachers who had successfully pursued such a support strategy were able to make precise judgements about the nature of help needed.

Time Constraints

Given severe time constraints in schools due to teacher workload (see Rhodes & Houghton-Hill, 2000; Thompson, 2001), management teams in schools will need to consider the creation of sufficient time to allow the coach-mentor to undertake their role. This may be particularly problematic in some primary schools where staff are already engaged in full-time class contact. It is reasonable to assume that staff in some schools may be reluctant to take on the additional responsibilities inherent in coaching and mentoring. Management teams may wish to train coach-mentors drawn from their own staff or alternatively consider the use of a consultant such as an LEA officer to fulfil this role. Harris (2001) has already highlighted the importance of a coaching or mentoring role for LEA advisers in their work with teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Conclusions

The national strategy for continuing professional development within the United Kingdom invites schools to place greater emphasis on school-based coaching, mentoring and peer-networking mechanisms. Strong elements of teacher collaboration and mutual support are implicit in these mechanisms and it is these elements that offer the potential benefits of raising teacher confidence, facilitating teacher learning and embedding improvements in professional practice within the classroom. Mutual teacher support and open networking have previously been identified as important in managing effective professional development cultures within schools (see Law & Glover, 1996; Law, 1997). In schools where the professional development culture already includes strong teacher collaboration, the adoption of coaching, mentoring and peer-networking should present fewer problems for staff. However, in many schools it is known that teacher collaboration is not prevalent (Harris, 2001) and management intervention may be necessary to enable mutual teacher support to flourish.

Each school has a unique context and an individual improvement journey to follow. Management teams seeking to enhance collaboration and adopt coaching, mentoring or peer-networking as a specific means to this end need to consider their position with respect to developing true collegiality. For example, some management teams may seek to develop their school towards a professional learning community (see Thompson, 2001), whereas others may adopt a more limited vision and strategically employ these mechanisms as quick fixes for immediate performance difficulties and avoid more radical change.

Given that schools spend significant sums of money on professional development with the intention of raising teacher performance (see Rhodes & Houghton-Hill, 2000; Rhodes, 2001), management teams who are actively seeking the potential benefits of coaching, mentoring and peer-networking will need to consider the placement of these mechanisms as part of normal working patterns in order to engender a climate of safety and trust. Management teams will also need to closely monitor and evaluate to assess the extent of any gains. Although not all staff are likely to be equally receptive as learners or suitable as either as coaches, mentors or peer-networkers, present lack of information and training in the United Kingdom (Harrison, 2001) is unhelpful in assisting schools to take these mechanisms forward.

In managing performance and professional development, management teams will either adopt, adapt or reject coaching, mentoring and peer-networking. In conclusion, it is suggested that nationally or internationally agreed guidance concerning good practices in coaching, mentoring and peer-networking in schools would be of use to teachers, management teams, trainers and others concerned with the raising of standards and attainment in schools. Further research and development should address this problem as a matter of urgency.

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