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Schools and academies

Research Associate Summary report

Jo Lindon

**Deputy headteacher, Harwood Meadows Community Primary School,
Bolton**

Resource

**Creating a culture of coaching:
upskilling the school workforce in times
of change**

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Introduction

Within an education culture striving for continuous improvement, there is a constant need to ensure that the appropriate skills, knowledge and actions of staff match the changing needs of the system. Coaching can assist in this process of ‘upskilling’.

In the National College publication *Leading Coaching in Schools* (Creasy & Paterson 2005: 8), the need was highlighted for coaching to become an embedded part of the culture of a school, with teachers being self-directed in their learning by the analysis of focused and supported observations of their professional practice, in order to deliver continuing change and improvement.

This research study explored how a small cross-phase sample of eight schools in one local authority area went about the process of creating a culture of coaching. It examined different approaches to integrating coaching into the school improvement cycle. Its findings offer advice to schools embarking on coaching as to the logistics of its implementation, its underpinning theoretical models (Whitmore 2002; Thomas 2009) and possible impact measures to assess its effectiveness (Cordingley et al. 2005). The study concludes that not only could internally offered coaching provide a more cost-effective mechanism for continuing professional development (CPD) provision, but by creating a culture in which coaching was embedded as part of professional practice, it could contribute to the continued upskilling of the school workforce, improve motivation, maintain challenge and deepen learning.

Methodology

Four secondary and four primary schools were selected on the basis of their involvement in coaching demonstrated by their interest in Bolton Local Authority’s Coaching Symposium. They represent a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds and of ability and examination achievement levels and are all at different stages of developing a coaching culture. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through:

- questionnaires to senior leaders, teachers and students which gathered personal attitudes towards coaching
- a total of 10 semi-structured interviews with senior and middle leaders in the schools

Interviews explored the following three research areas:

1. developing a culture of coaching
2. implementing the logistics of coaching
3. assessing the impact of coaching

Findings

Developing a culture of coaching

Schools found that coaching needed careful introduction before being launched. Successful implementation was achieved when:

- clear links were made with existing initiatives such as Assessment for Learning (AfL) and school self-evaluation
- coaching could be seen to supplement and improve existing CPD structures in terms of degree of personalisation, impact and more effective use of resources
- models of coaching such as Whitmore’s GROW (goal, reality, options, will) and particularly Thomas’s STRIDE (strengths, targets, real situation, ideas, decision, evaluation) could be used to maintain focus
- coaching was clearly based on Egan’s (1998) concept of the ‘skilled helper’ through the use of deep listening, precise questioning and promoting developmental action to stimulate effective self-reflection on professional practice

Implementing the logistics of coaching

Schools found that coaching could be more successfully implemented when:

- it was offered first as a voluntary activity and was supported by case studies from other schools and the opportunity for staff to experience taster sessions
- cross-departmental/subject area pairings were used rather than line manager involvement

or use was made of cluster systems across a number of smaller schools

- new technologies such as flip cameras were used to record lesson observations for subsequent reflection and were supplemented by the use of progression grids
- creative solutions were adopted in meeting the time needs of one-to-one coaching support, either through the use of planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time or timetabled provision with cover provided

In spite of the cost of this, senior leaders felt that the results of coaching represented good value for money in terms of the impact seen.

Assessing the impact of coaching

Schools taking part in this research, while accepting that impact on school improvement and pupil attainment data could not be fully disaggregated, nevertheless evidenced the success of their coaching initiatives in terms of:

- affirmative feedback, both informal and formal, from pupil voice in terms of quality of lessons experienced
- a greater sense of staff collegiality and motivation, with reported increases in staff confidence, degree of challenge and sense of mutual support
- a shift in climate, with a breaking down of pedagogical barriers between subject areas and the growth of generic learning conversations
- improved pupil outcome measures, both external and internal
- a more normalised and non-threatening lesson observation structure

Conclusions

Coaching was seen as a way of streamlining costs for schools, as it offered a cost-effective, internal and personalised approach to professional development.

The schools studied in this research reported a shift in culture, promoting a dialogue around what constitutes 'good teaching' and more collaborative team working, more effective planning, more efficient behaviour management strategies and more productive learning conversations.

Coaching was seen to take the concept of distributing leadership further to improve the development of middle leaders and to build specifically identified skill sets in terms of coaching colleagues.

The coaching model gave a framework of supportive yet challenging coaching conversations for colleagues to engage in. Through the 'skilled helper' model of coaching, participants were motivated to seek to improve and develop their practice, rather than seeing a hierarchical structure seeking to impose improvement on them.

Impact was seen in the deepening of learning for pupils that was backed up by attainment and progression data, observed both formally and informally.

Involvement in coaching promoted the internalisation of a system of reflecting on practice to maintain a continuing element of personal challenge for staff in order to sustain their own, and the children's, ongoing development.

Schools involved in this research were also working on ways to extend the impact of their coaching work through further collaborative working, upskilling more staff in coaching skills and sharing good practice in a wider arena, thus contributing to the system-wide evolution of a culture of coaching in times of change.

References

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Triumph Road,
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk
www.nationalcollege.org.uk

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