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Research Associate Full report

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Resource

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

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Abstract

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

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, the logistics of so doing, and the impact that this had on professional development and pupil progress.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with senior and middle leaders and supplemented by questionnaire responses, the report 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 and possible impact measures to assess its effectiveness. 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.

Introduction

The creation of a culture of coaching continues to occupy a significant place within professional development and school improvement initiatives. Growing out of a business model with a focus on empowering employees to reach ever more aspirational targets, coaching now stands as an important part of collaborative learning strategies within many professional development opportunities in education, ranging from initial teacher training to headship preparation and leadership development (Creasy & Paterson 2005: 4), underpinned by strong evidence (Cordingley et al. 2005) that it promotes learning and builds capacity for change within schools.

This small-scale research study sought to contribute to this evidence base by exploring the experience of leaders of eight schools within one local authority in creating a culture of coaching, both within their schools and in wider collaboration, and its perceived impact on the professional development of staff and the quality of learning that went on in their classrooms. It researched this through semi-structured interviews held with 10 senior and middle leaders in 4 primary and 4 secondary schools. This report describes how schools used coaching in preference to more conventional CPD opportunities to upskill their staff to meet the demands of a constantly changing workplace.

The following three research areas were explored:

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

These areas formed the basic structure of interviews with senior and middle leaders in the schools studied, to supplement the experience of the report author in coaching middle leaders, mentoring newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and developing a culture of coaching within her own school. Interviews explored concepts of coaching used in the schools studied, its use in collaborative professional development, and the impact it was felt to have had and how that might be evidenced. In particular, data from interviews was sought in order to generate evidence from schools already embarked on creating a coaching culture to inform those planning to do so.

The report explores how coaching could cut across hierarchical boundaries, build on experience from existing initiatives such as Assessment for Learning (AFL), and impact on both staff motivation and shared practice in order to seek to improve levels of pupil attainment. Although small in scale, the study nevertheless offers a resource bank of experience that may be of value to those seeking to generate a culture of coaching appropriate to their own specific contexts and circumstances.

Literature review

In seeking an answer to the question ‘what is coaching?’, Creasy and Paterson (2006: 9) accept that there is ‘no single straightforward answer’. However, a useful simple definition is offered by Whitmore (2002: 8), that:

Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them learn rather than teaching them.

Whitmore (2002: 54) also developed a seminal model of the coaching process based on the acronym GROW (goal, reality, options, way forward), set out as follows:

- **GOAL** setting for the session as well as for the short and long term
- **REALITY** checking to explore the current situation
- **OPTIONS** and alternative strategies or courses of action
- **WHAT** is to be done, **WHEN**, by **WHOM** and the **WILL** to do it

An alternative model based on the acronym STRIDE (strengths, targets, real situation, ideas, decision, evaluation) has been developed by Thomas (2009) as follows:

- **STRENGTHS**: paying attention to the strengths of participants within a resourceful mindset
- **TARGETS**: identifying targets to be achieved and motivations to achieve them
- **REAL SITUATION**: exploring the current situation to surface constraints and challenges
- **IDEAS**: tabling ideas which might succeed in achieving the defined targets
- **DECISION**: selecting the most appropriate option to move forward
- **EVALUATION**: reviewing progress and evaluating the results

Both models rely implicitly in their operation on Egan’s (1998) ‘skilled helper’ approach. This aims to allow the person being coached to be objective in looking at the problem they face, and the skilled helper acts as facilitator in helping them to see the ‘blind spots’ of their problem before developing an ideal scenario that they would like to work towards.

Such ‘skilled helper’ facilitation demonstrates the characteristics of effective mentoring and coaching as laid out in the national framework for mentoring and coaching (CUREE 2005). This identifies that effective coaching involves:

- a learning conversation through a professional dialogue rooted in evidence
- a thoughtful relationship based on trust and sensitivity
- a learning agreement establishing confidence in boundaries and ground rules
- combining support from fellow professional learners and specialists
- growing self-direction by increasing responsibility for own development
- setting challenging goals linked to school and individual priorities
- understanding different approaches and their underpinning theory
- acknowledging benefits to those coaching, recognising symbiotic learning

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- experimenting and observing, supporting innovation and creativity
 - using resources effectively, to protect and sustain learning and reflection

Evidence from the application of such coaching and facilitation models allows Powell, Chambers and Baxter (2001: 4) to assert that:

“Coaching enables individuals and teams to develop and flourish, to take responsibility for their own learning and to achieve their goals.”

Their impact may be seen at both an individual and collective level. For individual teachers, it has been found (Showers & Joyce 1996) that teachers involved in a coaching relationship practised new skills and strategies more frequently and applied them more appropriately than teachers who worked alone. There was a detectable impact on their classroom practice, as evidenced by Kohler and Crilley (1997), who studied a small sample of primary teachers and found that coached teachers were more effective in their use of questioning strategies and facilitating students’ interaction with their peers, and Edwards and Newton (1995), who studied a larger sample of 153 teachers, and found that they had a deeper understanding of their classroom practices.

Such impact was not, however, restricted to the individual teacher. Gamston, Linder and Whitaker (1993) conducted a small study of a coach working with two teachers, and found that the experience fostered the teachers’ collegiality and deepened their reflectivity, and Gorham (2008) pointed up the symbiotic relationship between those being coached specifically as leaders and the benefits to those around them and the organisations they led, by an increase in alignment and common purpose:

“Leadership coaching is a highly customized learning process that focuses on empowering a school leader to achieve exceptional results by aligning their purpose, choices, and actions. By increasing the leader’s focus, broadening perspectives, improving relationships, and augmenting one’s ability to make effective choices and changes, coaching supports a leader in being powerfully aligned with themselves and the people around them.”

Gorham 2008: 2

Schools, in their application of models of coaching, are pragmatic institutions, a fact recognised by Ross in his 1992 study on *Teacher efficacy and the effects of coaching on student achievement*, in which he sought to answer the question as to in what conditions coaching was most likely to be effective. Schools are less concerned with the detail of the model adopted than with the impact of its results. Descriptions of such results are to be found in Poglinco et al., *The Heart of the Matter* (2003), which studied how US schools embedded ongoing professional development through the use of coaching, and in the UK more recent small-scale studies have been carried out, for example, by Curran (2009), reported as *Career Wise: Mentoring But Not As We Know It*, looking at peer coaching as a working model in Hayes Park Primary School in the London Borough of Hillingdon. The staff there used coaching as a team approach to debate and develop their practice. A ‘neutral coach’ worked with the team to assist them in seeing the whole picture, identifying ‘blind spots’ as outlined using the Egan model (Egan 1998: 7–8). The neutral coach can be seen as Egan’s ‘skilled helper’, and the school asserts that ‘coaching is at the heart of how we develop’. The work at Hayes Park is an extension of the previous National College Research Associate report by Suggett (2006), looking at headteachers’ roles in coaching.

A recent practical guide for schools, *Coaching for Teaching and Learning* (CfBT 2010), offers advice to leaders on conducting coaching reviews, establishing coaching practice and scaffolding coaching conversations. It draws on a wider two-year research project, *Improving Coaching: Evolution not Revolution*. This present small-scale research study into the application of coaching approaches within schools within one local authority seeks to contribute to that process of evolution.

Methodology

The research sample

Four secondary and four primary schools were involved, from within a single local authority area. They were selected on the basis of their involvement in coaching as demonstrated by their interest in Bolton Local Authority's Coaching Symposium. They also represent a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds and of ability and examination achievement levels. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through:

- questionnaires to senior leaders, teachers and students which gathered personal beliefs and attitudes towards coaching
- semi-structured interviews with a member of the senior leadership team (SLT)

Selecting the participating schools

The eight schools involved in this research are all at different stages of developing a coaching culture within their organisations. Some have concentrated their efforts exclusively with staff, developing the AFL progression grids to move teaching towards 'outstanding'; others have involved all members of the organisation – teachers, teaching assistants and pupils – in this process. The 10 interviewees were all senior or middle leaders. The interviews were conducted between October 2009 and April 2010.

Collecting the data

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews supplemented by data gathered by questionnaires. The interviews each lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded for later analysis. During the interviews, contemporaneous notes were taken and key themes and central ideas highlighted and explored. The quotations that appear in this report were taken directly from these conversations.

Analysing the data

Both the notes made by the interviewer and the recordings of the interviews were analysed to examine key themes emerging in the research. These were explored further through ongoing involvement in Bolton Local Authority's Coaching Symposium and tested through the author's own continuing development of classroom practice.

Findings

Developing a culture of coaching

Schools, whatever their context, are all occupied with the issue of improvement. Such improvements are engineered through numerous initiatives: staff training, new policies, government intervention. Many bring with them the added issues of workload and logistical difficulties. Schools involved in this research were of the opinion that coaching should not be seen as yet another initiative to add to the workload of senior leaders or middle managers. Indeed, it should actually be the vehicle for delivering change.

In the National College publication, *Leading Coaching in Schools* (Creasy & Paterson 2005: 8), the need is 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. The questions remain, however:

- What motivates schools to be involved with coaching?
- How may coaching be linked with existing CPD structures?
- What models of coaching have been found of value?
- How may logistical barriers to participation be overcome?

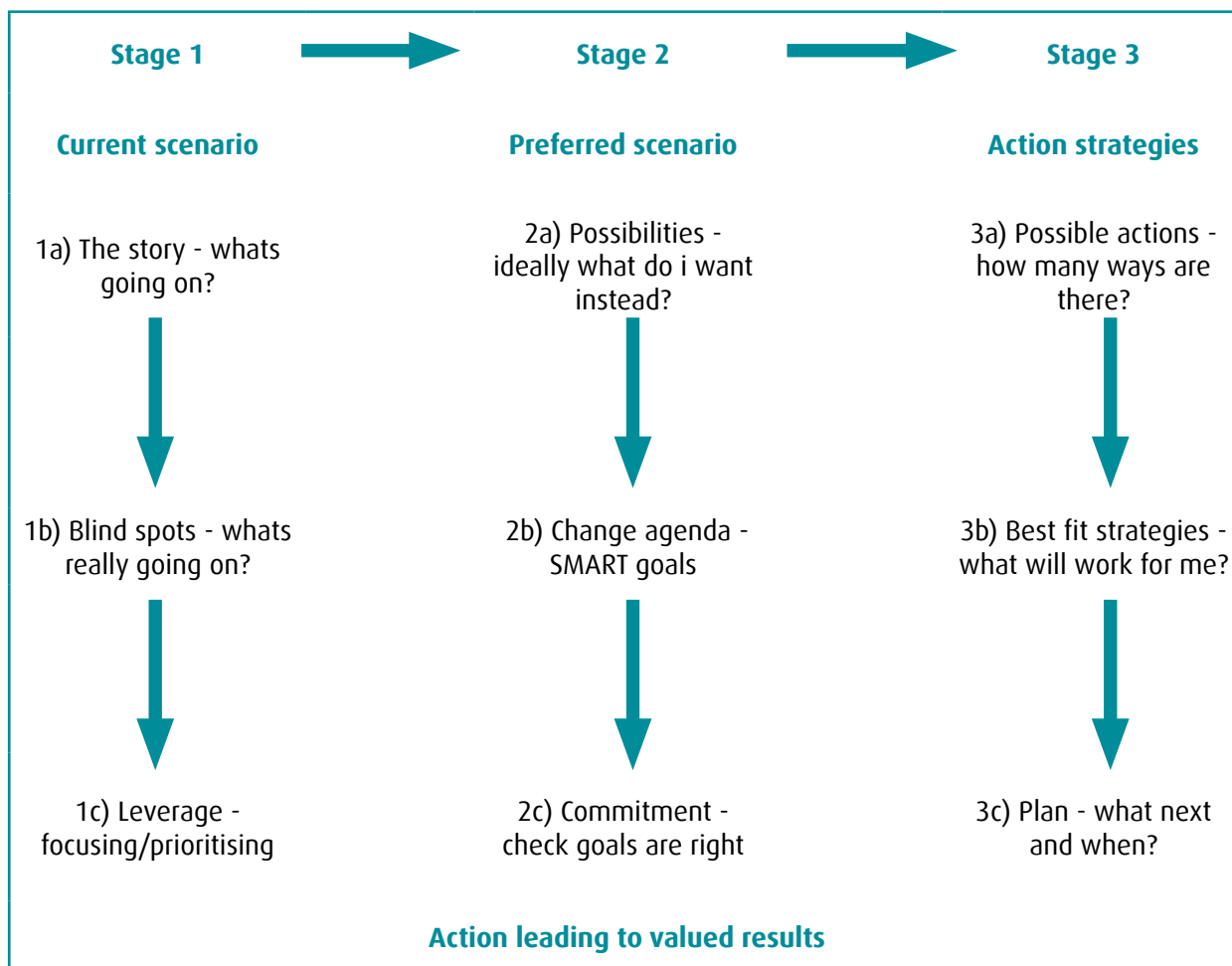
What motivates schools to be involved with coaching?

Findings from the literature review have suggested that schools are pragmatic organisations which may be motivated to engage with coaching for the perceived benefits that will ensue, and are prepared to adopt, modify and amend theoretical models of practice to fit their specific needs. One example of this was shown by three of the schools involved in the research who used coaching as a process for completing their school's self-evaluation form (SEF). In order to do this, they needed to rigorously assess where they were currently, by way of the SEF, before planning where they needed to move next. They used a self-generated three-stage model with three main questions:

1. What is going on?
2. What do I want instead?
3. How might I get to what I want?

Using coaching as a process for completing the SEF gave the opportunity to access a critical friend and use challenging conversations with one another to get a real picture of the present position before moving towards identifying potential improvements. In this way, a symbiotic relationship grew between these schools as each was able to benefit from the other.

The schools began their collaboration through a 'Listening School' project, where the SLTs of all three schools met together for a residential event. Each member of the SLT filled in a 360° diagnostic that generated a report. This formed the basis of the coaching work. Triads were formed between each tier of the SLT: headteachers, deputies, assistant heads and teaching and learning responsibilities TLRs. The triads coached one another according to Egan's 'skilled helper' model, as shown overleaf:



The coaching was designed to address the findings of the diagnostic: what issues did each individual have for development? What was the current situation? How would this development come about? The learning from the residential was felt to be profound for all three schools, as each member of the SLT came away not only with a personalised development programme, but also an action plan of priorities for their school.

It was soon realised that future learning would benefit from a lasting collaboration between these three schools. Since the residential, the SLTs have continued to meet to coach one another on key priorities for school improvement. This learning triad has now extended to include their school council members. Children have been on learning walks to one another's schools and are guided through coaching conversations with one another to deepen the learning taking place. The culture of coaching exists throughout the organisation.

In establishing the impact that coaching has had, the schools involved in this collaboration have measured impact through how their SEF judgements are moving towards the 'outstanding' criterion. In addition to this, data from stakeholder questionnaires also appears to support progression in identified areas. Equally, positive impacts have been recorded in pupils' attitudes, motivation and quantitative rates of progress. The difficulty of disaggregating the impact of coaching support from that of other variables is recognised, however.

How may coaching be linked with existing CPD structures?

Schools identified a number of concerns regarding the relationship between coaching and 'traditional' CPD. Many schools felt that traditional CPD courses had limitations in terms of their lasting impact. The schools involved in this research had not, however, used internal coaching to replace external CPD but rather to supplement and improve it, so that dissemination of external learning would become more routine through the use of coaching for improvement. In the secondary schools involved, however, coaching was being used specifically to target teaching and learning, rather than coaching for leadership or strategic reasons. One school leader said:

“At one time, people thought CPD was just as simple as ‘going on a course’. Now that’s much wider and people see CPD as something that has a lasting impact. It’s really a case of us trying to meet the demands of the staff who want to be coached.”

In many respects, coaching, while seemingly less costly than other forms of CPD, where course fees and supply costs are a constant demand on school budgets, also carries significant costs in time and resourcing and should by no means be seen as the 'cheaper option'. In his *Time for Coaching* case study of six schools across three local authorities, Suggett (2006) looked in detail at the key issue of creating the right conditions for coaching to take place. While finding that 'coaching is a more time-consuming option than a command and control, directive approach' (Suggett 2006: 8), he concluded that such investment is well balanced against the potential resultant benefits.

Coaching demands a significant time commitment from both parties, both coach and coachee, at the outset. Where it had been particularly effective, staff had been given a coaching period on their timetable. However, where it was not costed into CPD budgeting, there were some issues in having to seek time out of class where it was necessary to conduct lesson observations. Nevertheless, some school leaders believed this initial investment of time bore more fruitful rewards than the less enriching option of the ubiquitous course attendance. It was felt that coaching was a tool that reinforced training gained elsewhere, allowing the skills to become embedded into practice, either as pedagogical input or in leadership approach.

One area of omission in externally provided CPD courses is often the provision of space for personal self-reflection. Creating a staff who became increasingly self-reflective in their practice was one of the key benefits cited by the schools taking part in coaching activities, in providing both a structure and time allocation to prioritise reflective practice within the competing demands of busy schools.

What models of coaching have been found of value?

With a number of different models to choose from, schools chose coaching models that they deemed to be fit for their purpose. The schools taking part in this research used either the William Thomas STRIDE model or the Sir John Whitmore GROW model.

The STRIDE model had a number of supporters given that it was quicker to implement in the confines of the busy school environment. It was felt to be the preferred one to use given its achievable results within constrained time frames. In one school, the review cycle of the model was shown to have had no impact on cover as teachers were opting to use their planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time to engage with it.

However, whichever coaching model was adopted by schools, it was underpinned by the concept of the coach as the 'skilled helper'. Such involvement is focused on the skills of using challenging dialogue in order to move on the thinking of the coachee. In so doing, the coach does not offer answers or solutions to the coachee's problems, but explores the issue to the extent where blind spots are exposed, thereby allowing the coachee to explore the issue in sufficient detail that their answers may be illuminated.

In one school, staff were more reluctant to take part in this process, some viewing coaching as a deficit model that demonstrated they were being singled out. In some cases, this sense of vulnerability was overcome through use of a universal 'coaching contract', although senior leaders did admit some staff still found it difficult to engage with the process. This indicates the level of emotional intelligence that implementing coaching strategies demands from both sides of the coaching relationship.

The focus of the coaching was different with each individual case – managing staff, behavioural issues, dealing with challenging people, leadership coaching and career coaching being among those quoted – but many focused around the area of teaching and learning. Where teaching and learning was the focus, the coach's skills were focused on developing pedagogical practice through getting the coachee to review their own teaching by way of video review and use of lesson observation progression grids, with evaluations ranging from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding' teaching and learning. In using these progression grids, the subjectivity of appraisal was removed, and teachers were able to use the structure to identify their next steps and how to move their practice forward.

The sample schools demonstrated through their interviews that they were all of the opinion that despite the precise coaching model implemented:

- the coach should focus on the goals of the individual and/or the school and use sensitive questioning to establish an agreed action plan
- the process is based on the three core skills of deep listening, precise questioning and promoting action
- coaching fits best in a school culture that is predicated on shared leadership rather than a hierarchical structure

How may logistical barriers to participation be overcome?

Start-up issues

Schools taking part in the research agreed that coaching needed careful introduction before it was launched within school. In a number of cases, the schools initially started off coaching for improvement as a voluntary option for staff willing to take part. These sessions were run out of school hours where the motivation for coaching was shared using case studies from other schools and taster sessions of what a coaching session would look like. What was discovered in each case was a surprising uptake and interest by the staff once the project was launched. In the case of two schools, the trained coaches were initially unable to meet the demand of the willing coachees.

The schools involved all felt that timing, in relation to where they were in the Ofsted cycle, was crucial to launching the coaching approach. To use coaching empowers staff to undertake their own development. This assumes a level of competence at the outset. With schools in difficulty, there may be extra stages required before coaching can be undertaken, perhaps, for example, at leadership level. School-to-school coaching support is an example of where this need is being fulfilled. Indeed, the present Coalition government have expressed their desire to increase the number of national leaders of education (NLEs) and local leaders of education (LLEs) to meet this demand.

Resourcing issues

Schools where coaching had really been prioritised calculated coaching into their CPD budget, giving priority space on timetables, with supply cover arranged to release staff. Other schools saw coaching as part of the PPA time allocated to teachers, in a similar way to designated NQT time. In one school, they found that coaching was taking place during people's free time even where supply had been put in place; they saw this as a success of the programme as people were opting to make the time for extra sessions as they felt them to be so beneficial.

Opt-out clauses

Within the secondary schools involved, those researched all had coaching as an optional complement to staff training. This is one of the logistical considerations when dealing with large staff numbers. In such secondary schools, initiatives may start small but grow with proven success. This was not the case, however, with primary schools, where the application of an opt-out clause may mean that there is a very small target group. Therefore, some primary schools were taking a whole-staff approach to coaching within their schools, whereas others had pockets of staff involved in coaching thanks to other externally provided programmes

such as Leading from the Middle or the Outstanding Teacher Programme. In each case, the emphasis was on 'bottom up', non-hierarchical support, to be seen as clearly distinct from performance management.

Interviewees believed that, ideally, coaching should take place throughout the whole organisation, because after the initial start-up period, a critical mass of staff has then embraced the initiative and it becomes institutionalised. While a single approach might not be appropriate for different learning styles, the principle of personalised learning with embedded self-reflection was felt to be of universal applicability. As one senior leader said:

“Coaching is seen as more personalised CPD. We do the personalised learning agenda with children; why not with staff?”

Vehicles for coaching

In terms of organisational approaches, schools used a number of different ways to match coach to coachee, be it coaching within departments, line manager coaching or cross-skills coaching. At one school it was felt that teachers' skills were not subject-specific, so coaches need not be matched within subjects, while another school felt it made sense for the coach to be from the same department. This reinforces the principle that one size really does not fit all.

The role of the coach was not automatically apportioned to any set members of staff. Schools designed a programme unique and fitting to their specific needs, adopting different approaches in terms of the logistical implementation of coaching, some starting with heads of department, others with teachers who had specific targets for AfL. There was a conscious move to ensure coaching was non-didactic, with coaches and coachees deliberately chosen from different departments, in some cases to ensure participants did not feel vulnerable in discussing their areas for improvement with immediate colleagues.

Growing new coaches

With the need for coaching growing in the schools due to the perceived success of the programme, it became necessary for the pool of coaches to widen. There was a fear of not moving erstwhile coachees into the role of coach too quickly, with a concern for delivery pressures within challenging issues.

One way schools have tackled this is through peer coaching, with staff coaching one another on a range of issues. This has been introduced through staff INSET sessions, led by coaches themselves. One headteacher saw this as further testament to the developing confidence of the staff who were now happy to be involved in delivering training and coaching where they wouldn't have been before.

Implementing the logistics of coaching

Linking with existing initiatives

Parallels may be drawn between AfL and coaching. As within AfL, with children, where teaching is directed to their target objectives that need to be achieved, so also in coaching, teachers need to be helped by a 'skilled helper' to identify their blind spots and to take action to remedy them.

Within two of the surveyed schools, the original focus had been on AfL, with coaching introduced to be the vehicle for further developing AfL. The schools made the distinction that coaching was not something else that was to be done, but rather the vehicle for progression to raise standards. As an assistant headteacher put it:

“Many staff had already been trained on AfL, the coaching was designed to get this practice honed to a degree where it was having maximum impact on pupil attainment.”

However, there were some limitations exposed with this approach, and the coaching programme grew to adapt to the individual needs of the participants. One school had encouraged staff to pick focus area within AfL that they wanted to be coached on. For one department this was on pupil feedback.

This was then reassessed, as it was thought it did not meet all participants' needs, and that some staff may actually not have problems with AfL, but that they might have another issue, say behaviour management, which required greater attention. It became apparent in this school that the starting point for the coaching need not be restrictive. In many cases the focus shifted as the coaching conversations developed:

"Sometimes, a coachee would come to us with one issue, but after the first couple of sessions, we would get to the real blind spot, and this may not be the original focus of the coaching. In lots of ways, this is better though because without that initial coaching conversation, that blind spot might have gone undetected. For example, it might be that they think the behaviour management is the issue, but then you get deeper into it and it's really the challenge in the lesson that isn't there. It opens a lot of doorways."

Assistant headteacher

This demonstrates the skill demanded of the coach in managing to develop a series of questions to get to the real heart of the issue, without making suggestions that lead the coachee down a particular avenue. What makes a successful coach is the skill of having a true overview of a situation.

In another school, objective-led lessons became the initial focus. The remit was then to look at pupil outcomes and success criteria as the focus of the internal coaching. To a greater or lesser degree, children are increasingly doing this themselves in classrooms. As collaborative peer marking and self-assessment is becoming the norm for most schools, the skills of reflecting on one's own learning is one that is taught successfully in many classrooms, and may usefully be drawn on in developing coaching schemes for staff.

Maintaining a level of challenge

The use of scheduled coaching conversations was vital to the issue of maintaining challenge, both for coaches and coachees but also between the group of coaches themselves. One school had set up fortnightly meetings to ensure the quality of this dialogue. These allowed coaches to meet together to refresh their skills and discuss ways to develop challenge in the coaching they were working on. They also used coaching diaries to chart success and record key themes emerging from the work they were doing with individuals, so these key themes, rather than specifics, could be addressed at the coaches' meetings.

However, many of the coaches involved had been mentors previously, and one of the difficulties was to keep the concept of the roles distinct and to maintain a focus on reflection and the supported self-generation of solutions by the person being coached.

Arranging the mechanics of coaching

Meeting the demands of arranging timetables for both coaching meetings and observations proved to be a real logistical challenge. This was particularly the case for secondary schools with large numbers of staff involved. To resolve this, a non-departmental system was seen as a more successful approach, as some departments might not have enough staff to facilitate coaching exclusively to their staff, whereas using transferable skills, coaches could benefit a wider group and break down departmental boundaries across common issues such as behaviour management, pace of lessons, engaging activities and deployment of support staff. As one school leader asserted:

"It used to be that each coach would coach within the department, but now it's mixed really. We tend to advertise for coachees and then decide who would best fit with the coaches, depending on what they need to be coached in. It doesn't have to be within the department. That wouldn't work with so many staff."

This open approach to coaching seemed to be the preferred method among the schools studied. Some concerns were raised by respondents where 'artificial' coaching was used to demonstrate the benefits of the process. In these cases, staff were encouraged to come to the coaching with 'an issue' to be coached on. These sessions were usually run by external trainers and not necessarily by teachers. However, opinion was divided on this as a means of experiencing the process.

In the instances quoted, staff began by being reticent in presenting their issue, although through the coaching that happened, some learning and progress was felt to have taken place, with a real change in attitude being observed.

There had been a growth in areas of focus to which coaching was directed. Some schools continued to work exclusively within teaching and learning, with coaching focused on AfL; others were moving away from prescriptive approaches to widen the scope for the individual to select areas of coaching need. This was mostly dependent on the current situation of the school, and where they were in terms of embedding AfL principles. One secondary school leader felt that they had made sufficient progress from their starting point with AfL to encompass other areas to benefit teaching and learning:

“Initially the focus was all AfL, [staff] chose a priority based on priorities within their department. Within a couple of years, we realised that was a bit too rigid and didn’t necessarily meet their needs. It could be they need coaching on active learning strategies or behaviour management. So generally, we coach them on the issues that they identify.”

Lesson observations to promote guided self-reflection were key to the coaching process. Schools were creative in the way they approached this. Some schools teamed staff with other members of the department to shadow them or arranged observations of good practice by advanced skills teachers (ASTs). They were then coached through the experience of watching examples of others’ work. Two of the secondary schools were making use of new technologies in support of this. Flip cameras were being used to record lessons. These recordings were then shared with coachees who assessed the lesson using progression grids. Then, when they had been coached through planning for their own lesson, they opted to record themselves and reassess their progress against the progression grids. This, in itself, demonstrates growth in levels of staff confidence where they felt sufficiently secure in their own practice to be filmed, to have children film them and to have their lessons used as exemplars when devising progression grids to be used with coaching teams.

In primary schools, considerations with regard to staff numbers can create too small a teaching staff for effective in-school coaching. To address this, some schools have made use of the cluster systems to coach staff across their local school areas. This was also felt to have other beneficial effects as people felt less vulnerable in discussing issues outside their immediate school context:

“Staff feel a lot less threatened through a third party. It’s also easier for the coach to question outside their context, because the solution isn’t always clear. It makes you really look for those blind spots.”

Assistant headteacher

This cross-school practice is also being rolled out on some other programmes. The Leadership Symposium for Bolton has been approached by one cohort of Leading from the Middle coaches to request a formalised triad system where coaches and coachees may be paired up outside their context, to better appreciate blind spots and to enable completely impartial dialogue, as some involved feel more able to expose vulnerability away from a coach who may also be their line manager.

In one primary school, coaching was being focused on lesson observations, analysed through the Outstanding Teacher Programme’s use of triads in developing lesson plans, and structures for observing and evaluating lessons. This process was also being used with teaching assistants and students, through collaborative marking based on use of success criterion and other student activities such as peer mediation. By the use of such approaches it was felt that coaching was being used in a more layered way, with such tiers of coaching developing a real embedded culture of coaching within the school.

Assessing the impact of coaching

Schools studied identified the impact of their coaching programmes within several distinct areas, as follows:

- pupil voice
- staff collegiality
- pupil attainment
- motivational levels
- lesson observations

These will now be considered in turn.

Pupil voice

Some schools had sourced measurable data in terms of pupil voice. The collaboration of three schools who took part in the 'Listening School' project used an online survey package to gauge impact on pupils. This gave measurable data of numbers of pupils enjoying lessons, how pleased parents were with the school's success and also the views of teachers, governors and the wider school community. It was clearly recognised, however, that the survey responses could not be exclusively attributed to coaching.

One secondary school was able to cite evidence of how the use of the discourse around lesson planning and making the language of pedagogy explicit with the children arising from the coaching process was met with a very favourable response from pupils:

"Pupil voice is saying 'lessons are always engaging, the teacher shares learning objectives and the success criteria are shared'. The pupils were using the terminology that the teachers use. They are acutely aware of how 'good' or 'outstanding' lessons are judged."

Assistant headteacher

Staff collegiality

One hard-to-measure result was the increase in staff confidence. In two secondary schools, there has been a gradual development in the coaching programme. In both cases, the school's programme has been over-subscribed and resulted in some former coachees being trained to become coaches themselves. Senior leaders interviewed felt that the process of the coaching system itself had allowed staff to feel supported through a process of improvement, and there was continued sustainability through taking part in supported change. This gave rise to increased confidence and contributed to professional development that had a greater impact than any number of one-off courses.

The dissemination of the results of the coaching process was greater than usual forms of CPD that may remain exclusively with the SLT, the department or, in the worst-case scenario, with the individual. In these schools, a number of coachees had gone on to be involved in training day sessions and led staff INSET days at other schools to report their success and assist other schools in implementing their own coaching programmes. In this way, the ripple effect of the impact was seen as going well beyond the boundaries of the school, for example in influencing Greater Manchester Authority, whose schools have demonstrated such an interest in coaching that it has given rise to a similar coaching symposium.

One secondary school observed a shift in staffroom climate to one where learning conversations were taking place:

"People are talking about the transferable skills.... We all want pupils to succeed. Members of staff have focused more on learning than teaching. We no longer see the same department boundaries that we used to."

Assistant headteacher

Another school has seen a dramatic cultural shift with a breaking down of subject boundaries at a pedagogical level.

“There is more of a shift; children have an ownership of learning from passive to active learning. There has been a new learning policy created based on the work the coaching group has done. Lesson plans are now called learning plans. Focus is more on the learning, and use of success criteria.”

AST

Pupil attainment

While it is accepted that it is impossible to disaggregate the influence of coaching from other factors impacting on pupil attainment, schools nevertheless felt there had been a significant impact. One senior leader said:

“The catalyst [for the curriculum change] has been the coaching group because they have trialled all of these new initiatives. They have all taken a role and been able to explore it through developing their action plans in the STRIDE model.”

This reinforces the view that coaching should be seen as the vehicle for implementing change rather than the addition of simply another initiative.

Equally, it was felt that it was the dissemination of good practice that had had a real impact on results, with coaching being the ideal vehicle for such dissemination. For example, one secondary school, where the coaching had focused on AfL, attributed its recent successes in the number of A and A* grades to the implementation of the coaching programme.

“In Science we’ve moved from 66 per cent to 92 per cent in two years. We have four coaches in a department of nine. The head of Humanities fast tracked a group of Year 10 and they achieved 88 per cent A/A*. My own area, triple award Physics, was 66 per cent A*. Prior to being on the coaching programme, A/A* was around 20 per cent. There’s a significant shift in enabling gifted and talented pupils being able to achieve more.”

Middle leader

However, while here there was a focus on the impact on gifted and talented pupils, other schools felt there was an impact on all pupils through an improvement in lesson quality:

“People are now happy to be observed and feel confident with other people being in the classroom. The original remit was to move teaching from ‘satisfactory’ to ‘good’, we have now moved significantly to ‘good’; 70 per cent of lessons were judged ‘good’, based on a mini ‘internal Ofsted’.”

Motivational levels

Coaching is not a model that can be imposed on an individual. Unlike other forms of CPD, where the learner may be passive in receiving external training, coaching relies on the assumption that there is a willingness to change and in so doing is bound to the coachee’s own level of emotional intelligence, their commitment to the organisation and its values, and their compatibility with its vision and culture. Personal motivation is thus a key need for effective participation.

In one school where staff were invited to take part in coaching, some reacted defensively, seeing their selection as an indication that the leadership team were unhappy with their progress. In this school, however, after initial concerns over selection, people could see the benefits to them and their practice and there was a marked shift reported as the coaching selection process moved to one of over-subscription, with more staff requesting to take part than the trained coaches could deal with.

One issue in securing this progress was the consultation process used to explain the programme and its benefits. This led to staff feeling more supported by the SLT as they began to recognise the value put on their personal and professional development. This was seen in terms of time being given as well as the personalised and individualised approach that coaching offers. In this school, the issue of potential tensions over imposed targets, as highlighted in the CfBT study *Coaching for Teaching and Learning* (2010), became less problematic as staff felt that coaching was supporting them in reaching these targets. They were already reconciled to the fact that schools were target-driven places, but that coaching was a means of meeting them, rather than a barrier.

Motivation can be improved by developing the degree of emotional intelligence at work in school relationships. The collaboration of three schools taking part in the coaching triads had used several forms of measuring emotional intelligence within their SLTs. The results of these diagnostics were then analysed to assess areas where there were strengths and some where members needed to be aware of some weaknesses. In coaching one another as a result of this analysis, the SLTs involved could identify areas for skill development outside of their normal emotional comfort zones. Securing progress in these areas could then be seen as a motivating factor in supporting the benefits of the coaching process and as such could well be extended to involve other staff.

Lesson observations

Progression grids of lesson observations were used in the schools studied as a way of generating quantitative data to assess the efficacy and impact of coaching in enabling teaching to move further towards 'good' or 'outstanding'. It was felt that use of these grids provided a clear structure to the coaching conversations that would follow. The teacher would self-assess their lesson with the assistance of the coach as critical friend. The self-reflection not only internalised the process of development, but it was less threatening than a line manager going in to point out areas for development. Consistency and objectivity were secured by lessons being observed by different coaches to moderate judgements. The fact that this was not a top-down process as in performance management meant that teachers were happy to have colleagues in to observe their lessons.

One of the schools had invested in flip cameras specifically for the coachees. This technology was chosen based on the ease of use and the fact that the cameras have an internal USB for immediate download purposes. These were used on a completely voluntary basis, with teachers having agreed to have their lessons filmed for them to review their practice later. The strengths of this approach were seen to be threefold, to:

- normalise the process of observation
- permit more objective appraisal
- provide an evidence base to assess impact

As one participating teacher put it:

“Watching yourself teaching can really help some of the people who aren’t necessarily as self-aware. It will really help to give them an overview for everything that is going on in the classroom.”

The CfBT report, *Coaching for Teaching and Learning* (2010: 19), also includes a section on the possible use of video technology in lesson observation. While reminding users of appropriate safeguarding procedures, it asserts that:

“video footage gives maximum potential for unpacking the lesson. It also allows the coachee to work in a more self-directed fashion to prepare for the coaching conversation.”

Direct feedback from teaching assistants and the pupils themselves in observing lessons and analysing progress, while perhaps challenging a re-evaluation of traditional views of hierarchies and power relationships, has also been used in the schools studied to provide a valuable measure of the impact of coaching strategies. Indeed, in some of the schools that took part in this study, experience of pupils observing lessons has been developed into a scheme of pupil coaching as part of the process of raising pupil attainment. Where AfL had been a starting point for change, pupils were also already training in collaborative marking procedures, and it was therefore a relatively small step to move this forward into pupil peer coaching itself.

Conclusions

Coaching can be seen as a way of streamlining costs for schools, as it offers a cost-effective, internal and personalised approach to professional development, rather than more costly, externally provided CPD, with its limitations of lack of tailored personal focus and potential mismatch to individual skills and needs.

The schools studied in this research reported a [shift in culture](#), which one school specifically attributed to coaching, in promoting a dialogue around what constitutes 'good teaching' and more collaborative teamworking, more effective planning, more efficient behaviour management strategies and more productive learning conversations. The school believed this to be as a result of the coaching process enabling people to feel more confident in sharing information together rather than working in isolation.

Coaching is seen to take the concept of [distributing leadership](#) further to enhance the development of middle leaders and to build specifically identified skill sets in terms of coaching colleagues. The different approaches adopted in undertaking coaching in each context allows schools to look at their own development programmes and tailor coaching strategies to suit them. Where coaching was seen to be most effective in this research is where schools have a fully integrated culture wherein the coaching conversations operate at all levels and staffrooms have dialogue around teaching and learning, with colleagues facilitating development of one another.

The quality of conversation in the workplace is key to engendering sustainable change. Schools taking part in this research felt that dialogue which could be seen as simply a 'cosy chat' could be hugely unproductive, with colleagues thereby able to keep challenge to their practice at a safe distance. However, the coaching model gives a framework of supportive yet [challenging coaching conversations](#) for colleagues to engage in, where this has all but been eliminated. Through the 'skilled helper' model of coaching, participants are motivated to seek to improve and develop their practice, rather than seeing a hierarchical structure seeking to impose improvement on them.

The focus on teaching and learning within the coaching models employed within the schools involved in this research had its impact directly on the classroom in a way that it was felt that other forms of external CPD did not. The impact was seen in the [deepening of learning](#) for pupils that was backed up by attainment and progression data, observed both formally and informally. It is recognised, however, that because many other initiatives are running in tandem in schools, improvements in pupil attainment cannot securely be attributed solely to coaching initiatives. However, school leaders interviewed placed significant importance on the role that coaching had to play on moving teachers' practice forwards, thereby contributing significantly to the securing of pupils' attainment and enhancing their learning chances. Respondents thought the learning experiences that were growing as a result of the coaching were soundly rooted in AfL principles that made for deeper learning.

The results of the coaching on classroom practice are sustainable in the longer term by empowering staff to continue to use the acquired skills once the coaching relationship has ended. This was particularly evident in the internalisation of a system of [reflecting on practice](#) that maintained 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.

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