Peer Coaching: Teachers Helping Teachers in Professional Development

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Introduction

In the last five years several major education reform initiatives have been implemented by the Ministry of Education to meet the challenges brought on by the exponential growth in information and communication technologies and knowledge. At the same time, staff training and development programmes have been re-structured and expanded to enable teachers to respond effectively to the constantly changing circumstances of their work. Now every MOE teacher is entitled to 100 hours of training per year and $200 for training costs; the call is for teachers to undertake on-going professional development.

It is recognized, however, that new learning achieved in training workshops requires on-site support and coaching in the school workplace before it can be a part of a teacher’s general practice and active repertoire; that is, if it is to result in professional growth for the teacher. Throughout education literature the preferred model for enhancing teachers’ professional development is consistently the peer coaching, or the collaborative networking model. Peer coaching involves teachers supporting teachers as they apply and reflect on new ways of teaching that will better meet the diverse needs of students (Swafford, 2000). Peer coaching is seen as an excellent catalyst for total staff involvement in instructional discourse and for school improvement. With its emphasis on sharing, partnerships, open communication, trust, and continuous learning, peer coaching is believed to be a model for achieving the goals of education reform (Caccia, 1996; Joyce and Showers, 1996).

This article reviews some recent research literature and findings that highlight the importance of peer coaching in teacher professional development and also
shows why school management support is crucial for successful peer coaching. It will conclude with some suggestions for facilitating and supporting peer coaching in the school context.

**Review of Research**

**What is Peer Coaching?**

Peer coaching is a simple process designed for colleagues to help each other improve teaching or learning situations. It is also defined in the literature as *peer review, peer observation, collaborative or collegial observation, peer collaboration, and collaborative peer observation*. Robbins (1991) defines peer coaching as:

>a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace (p. 1).

It involves non-judgmental, reflective dialogue rather than pronouncements of success or failure. Self-analysis is encouraged and valued as much as the opinion of the observer, and both the teacher and the observer experience growth during the process (Garmston, Lindner, and Whitaker, 1993).

The peer coaching process can be used for any skill. Its major purpose is to help implement new training, or to help sustain existing training so that the training will impact on student learning (Gottesman, 2000). Most commonly, two or more teacher colleagues work together around the shared observation of teaching to solve classroom problems and to improve classroom instruction. The peer coaching generally involves a pre-conference, a lesson observation, and a post-conference (Gottesman, 2000; Robbins, 1991).

However, as Joyce and Showers (1996) have cautioned, peer coaching is not an end in itself and it is not a school reform initiative *per se*. It is rather a means and a catalyst for school improvement, serving to extend and institutionalize the selected school reform practices. Peer coaching has been used in a variety of settings, but the goal is always the same: to improve instruction for all children (Swafford, 2000).

**Research on Peer Coaching**

Showers and Joyce (Joyce and Showers, 1980, 1982, 1996; Showers and Joyce, 1982, 1984) have consistently advocated peer coaching as an on-site dimension
of staff development. Their survey of evaluations of various staff development programmes focusing on teaching and the curriculum in the 1970s showed that only 10% of the participants implemented what they had learned (Showers and Joyce, 1996). Beginning in 1980 they conducted a series of studies to test the hypothesis that “coaching, following initial training, would result in much greater transfer than would training alone” (Showers and Joyce, 1982, 1984). In their studies, the training procedures used to develop skills in teachers comprised four main components:

(i) the study of the theoretical basis of the new skill or method,
(ii) the observation of demonstrations by experts,
(iii) practice with feedback, and
(iv) teachers coaching one another as they work the new model into their repertoire.

It was found that although the first three components - theory, demonstration, and practice with feedback - were sufficient to enable most teachers to use a model fluently, development of skill alone did not ensure transfer. Relatively few teachers in the study implemented the learned skill and included it in their general practice. However, when the coaching component was added, implementation rose dramatically. The results were consistent, and they showed that teachers who had a coaching relationship - that is, who shared aspects of teaching, planned together, and pooled their experiences - practiced new skills and strategies more frequently and applied them more appropriately than did their counterparts who worked alone to expand their repertoires.

**A Singapore Experience**

Since the mid-1990s the Singapore Ministry of Education has introduced several major reform initiatives as part of a broad response to societal change. In the wake of these reforms is a great expansion of professional development workshops and courses. Most of these courses offered are all-at-once deals that do not include elements to transfer skills to the classroom. Often there is no systematic follow-up, reinforcement, or feedback. The assumption seems to be that if teachers like the training they will use it in the classroom.

However, when teachers return to their workplace, there is often no expectation of staff implementation and no mechanism for replacing old practices with new. One example is the four-day, full-time teacher mentor course that the writer has been conducting for senior teachers in schools. In the end-of-course
evaluations administered by the Ministry of Education, feedback on the usefulness of the course were as invariably positive. The participants often stated that they had learnt a lot, and were confident and keen to play the teacher mentor role on their return to school. This was despite the concerns they had voiced during the course about the perceived lack of support in the school organizational structure for transfer of training to take place.

In September 2001 the writer conducted a follow-up study on a group of thirty-seven secondary school senior teachers, six months after they had completed the teacher mentoring course. The results showed that only three teachers had implemented the teacher mentoring skills and the acquired learning. Most claimed that they did not have the opportunity to apply what they had learnt, as they had not been asked to perform the role of teacher mentor. The sad truth is, if teachers lack the skills in transferring their training, or if its implementation is not expected or supported, the training goes to waste on the shelf. Moreover, unless such one-shot staff development “takes hold” in a school – that is, unless the new teaching skill becomes part of the general practice and normal routine – it will not improve instruction and increase student learning (Gottesman, 2000). Teachers need to be given support and assistance in transferring their new training to their active repertoire.

**The Value of Peer Coaching**

Peer coaching offers one way to bridge the gap between training and transfer. In their investigation on the usefulness of peer coaching, Joyce and Showers (1982) found that peer coaching made a difference in helping teachers develop expertise with new teaching techniques and to sustain their on-site use. Renyi (1998), who reported on the findings of a study on professional development practices of high-achieving school districts in the United States, noted that peer support and collegial partnerships were the mainstay of the most effective and the longest lasting professional development programmes.

In *Improving Schools From Within*, Barth (1990) argues that teachers will grow professionally when they are given opportunities to observe each other teach, and to collaborate in the designing and preparation of instructional materials. Glickman (1993) notes that through the peer coaching process of personal observation, feedback, and reflective discussion, teachers strengthen the overall effectiveness of classroom instruction. This form of peer assistance allows a teacher to grow from
his or her mistakes without the penalty of embarrassment or intimidation that surrounds traditional evaluation (McLaughlin and Talbert 1994).

Peer coaching can help teachers produce ‘teacher knowledge’. Teaching is typically an isolated job, with teachers in rooms surrounded by young learners. Hargreaves (2000) writes that teachers in a school:

are often collectively ignorant of the knowledge that exists among themselves; in consequence, they cannot share and draw upon that knowledge. At the same time, they do not know what knowledge is lacking, that is, recognize their ignorance, to identify where new knowledge needs to be created (Moon, et al., 2000, p. 225).

No mechanism is built into the teaching profession that allows it to improve and continue that improvement over time. In this situation, there seems to be no way of learning from the experiences of successful and effective teachers (Stigler and Hiebert 1997).

Peer coaching can provide teachers with an avenue to help each other build up and document the ‘inside’ or ‘teacher knowledge’ (vs ‘outside’ or researcher knowledge): knowledge gained from learning from each other, from looking at student work, from helping to design curricular and assessment materials, and from reflecting on their own practice (Lieberman and Miller, 2000). Producing their own practitioner knowledge (to complement ‘researcher knowledge’) is itself an important form of professional development for teachers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999; Richert, 1996).

Peer coaching can also provide support for teachers in school. Gottesman (2000) summarises well what peer coaching can do in this respect.

- It can establish a line of communication between faculty members by providing a safe framework for discussing instructional issues.
- It provides teachers with a chance to think and talk about their lessons, and to bring to a conscious level what many of us do instinctively.
- It allows teachers to expand teaching skills by expanding coaching skills. Teachers often learn more in the role of coach than they do as a peer being coached.
- It provides adult and professional companionship to teachers who have been closeted with children in the traditional structure.
- It provides a support system for adult workers. This in turn enhances personal and professional respect among teachers.
The coaching situation increases trust and energy levels among teachers because through coaching they learn to share professional knowledge and skills.

There is growing emphasis on the need for schools today to develop as learning communities and learning organizations. Peer coaching could form a real part of the school operations and become an integral part of such a school culture (Robbins, 1991). Lieberman and Miller (2000) contend that through jointly working on their professional renewal and learning, teachers can build a strong school culture that values collegiality, openness, and trust. This new culture will support the experimentation, risk taking, and feedback that is necessary for improving teaching practice. As West-Burnham and Sullivan (1998) have pointed out, citing the findings of a research conducted by Rosenholtz (1991):

> a common, shared culture is an essential pre-requisite to the creation of a learning environment... Teacher learning has the effect of helping to create such a culture and is a crucial and significant manifestation of that culture (West-Burnham and Sullivan, 1998, p. 45).

**Why Is Support from School Management Vital in Facilitating Peer Coaching?**

Peer coaching will not occur by itself. Neither can it succeed in isolation and without school management support. Leadership is crucial. As Gottesman (2000) insists, peer coaching must have an advocate in an influential position to make it happen. A fundamental requirement for the success of implementing peer coaching in schools is commitment and active involvement of school management. The principal’s role is to recognize the value of peer coaching in renewing and improving schools, and provide the type of school organization and structure that allows it. Both administrators and teachers must be committed to facilitating peer coaching (Cox. *et al.*, 1991). If teachers do not see any of their leaders in school directly involved in the reform and following through with directives, materials, and procedures, they will not take the professional development initiative seriously. By actively sponsoring the initiative and helping in the planning and preparation for implementation, the principal is developing a supportive work environment for peer coaching to begin.

The creation and maintenance of a culture that encourages teacher learning is also vital. Joyce and Showers (1996) have argued that peer coaching cannot be
successful in a school where the culture is either hostile (negative and untrusting) or apathetic (indifferent and unmotivated). Schools will have to develop a culture of learning for all members of their community. Such a culture—that encourages teacher reflection and development—is both a pre-condition and an outcome of effective professional development (Blandford, 2000). School leaders may need to re-engineer their culture by creating new norms of collegiality, empowerment, and shared accountability for school success.

Principals must be willing to establish new norms, because with peer coaching teachers will have to forgo the old ways of individualism, isolationism, and privatism (Lortie, 1975). As Lieberman and Miller (1999) have suggested, teachers will need to develop new ways of working and of viewing themselves and their profession. These represent major shifts in perspective and practice, and support and leadership provided by the principal is crucial if the transitions are to be made successfully.

What Kind of Support Can School Management Provide?

In approaching school reform and improvement, Ball and Goldman (1997) recommended that schools need to adopt a "system perspective." Attention has first to be given to the school culture and the existing social and organizational structures that reinforce and protect the status quo (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990; Showers, 1996). Traditional norms and practices that interfere with the implementing of peer coaching need, therefore, to be identified and critically reviewed. School leaders have also to help their teachers make the shifts in perspective and practice needed for the development of a learning community in the school that will support peer coaching.

School leaders will also need to provide for planned participation of the staff. The design for implementing peer coaching should include a "game plan" for capacity building. Peters (2000) suggests it is best to begin with a critical mass of staff, followed by the strategic, incremental involvement of the remaining staff within a two to three year time frame thereafter. Involvement in peer coaching, however, must be voluntary (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990; Robbins, 1995), and teachers should select their peer coaching partners and determine the focus of peer coaching observations and conferences (Gordon et al., 1995). For the participating staff, training to promote effective lesson observation and conferencing skills is then provided. This is essential for peer coaching to be successful.
In addition, it is necessary to establish incentives for teacher engagement in peer coaching. Ways to eliminate some non-essential duties of teachers will have to be found so that they will not see peer coaching as just an "add-on". Allowing flexibility in timetable arrangements for staff to conduct peer coaching can be helpful. In the Singapore context, time spent by staff on peer coaching will be seen as part of their entitlement to 100 hours of professional development each year. In some schools, where peer coaching has been institutionalized, principals have even granted staff involved in systematic peer coaching exemption from annual evaluative observation by school administrators. Instead, their classroom teaching is evaluated once every two or three years. With such initiatives, teachers perceive that they are being treated as professionals who can be responsible for their own professional development. The trust and respect shown by the school leaders will be a powerful incentive for teachers to accept peer coaching as a model for professional development.

Conclusion

In this new millennium, changing contexts are placing enormous demands on teachers and teaching. It is recognized that continuing, career-long professional development is necessary for all teachers in order to keep pace with change and to review and renew their own knowledge, skills and visions for good teaching. Peer coaching, the process of teachers helping teachers learn in a non-judgmental and non-evaluative way, is an effective way of promoting professional development among teachers. Successful implementation in schools, however, will depend on the commitment of its leaders to the idea, and their active involvement and support in providing the environment and incentives for its use. While all teachers should have a stake in their own development and take some responsibility for it, they are most likely to develop professionally when the school is supportive. School managers, therefore, need to create, maintain and develop the conditions that will facilitate and support effective teacher learning.

Implications for Schools

1. Peer Coaching can be a catalyst for school improvement and whole staff involvement in professional collaboration and instructional discourse.
2. In adopting Peer Coaching as a model for professional development the following points are important.
• School management must provide leadership in implementing peer coaching.
• Both school management and teachers must be committed to the concept of peer coaching and be actively involved in facilitating its growth;
• A learning culture must be nurtured that supports teacher collaborative learning through peer coaching. Such a culture is both a pre-condition and outcome of professional development.

3. The introduction of peer coaching is more likely to be successful if
• systematic training in peer coaching is instituted in the school to empower teachers in undertaking this process for professional learning;
• incentives are provided for teachers to become involved in peer coaching;
• verbal and tangible support is given by school management for the peer coaching programme, and its implementation is monitored.

References


