

Case study: A Secondary School, Manchester

Learning from observation

Senior leadership teams and CPD leaders need to recognise the skills involved and plan for their development. From the start, they could audit the skills of staff, should consider carefully who will be coaches, assess the need for specialist support, and provide training and opportunities for coaching of coaches. Senior staff may also volunteer to be coached as this sends out an important message to the rest of the staff.

The Secondary National Strategy's *Coaching in secondary schools* DVD-ROM ref: 0115-2006DVD-EN provides extensive guidance and case studies about developing coaching programmes across a school.

Here, we present the experience of a secondary school in Manchester

Peer coaching

'Coaching made me more prepared to experiment with my teaching.'

'It is a reflective tool that makes me think about my teaching.'

'Coaching is non-threatening and makes you think of new ways of teaching.'

These are quotes from teachers at a school where coaching has captured the commitment and enthusiasm of those who have been involved in the early stages of a coaching programme. After one year, during which the school conducted a pilot enquiry which tracked the performance of students, coaching is also beginning to make a difference to the results of the end of key stage tests.

The school's performance at GCSE had already moved from 17% in 2002 to a 2004 position of 50%. The school is now confident that using coaching will help advance this further in 2005.

The school context

Situated in South Manchester, the secondary school is a co-educational comprehensive school with 946 students on roll and a waiting list for all years. It is a city comprehensive serving Wythenshawe and Benchill, the most socially deprived ward in England; 52% of students are entitled to free meals and 35% are on the special needs register.

Why coaching?

The school felt that 'traditional' methods of staff professional development were not working for every member of staff. Leaders were increasingly aware of the potential they had within their own school.

When the opportunity arose to join the Manchester Collaborative Coaching School Network the school was keen to participate.

What type of coaching is used?

A lack of hierarchy and status, and learning with and from each other were key principles of coaching from the outset. Coaching at the school is a confidential process of peer coaching through which professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices, share ideas, teach one another and collaboratively solve problems in the workplace.

How is coaching used at this school?

The school had already established a mentoring system for new staff members, which involved a trusted, more senior colleague offering practical assistance regarding the culture and day-to-day running of the community. To complement this, coaching focuses on the development and sharing of craft knowledge to improve the confidence and competence of teachers in the classroom. Unlike the mentoring programme within the school, coaching is about equal partnership.

In starting out on the journey, the (coaching) coordinator explained that improved student outcome was the priority. The senior lead teacher made the decision that in the initial stage, coaching would involve staff working with Year 9 pupils. They decided to carry out a pilot enquiry which would track the performance of the students and provide data to determine whether teacher involvement in coaching made a difference to their value-added performance in end of key stage tests.

There was also a commitment that staff who were to be involved would be encouraged to engage with colleagues across traditional subject department boundaries, so that they could explore whether, and to what extent, different subject specialists could inform and support each other's learning.

What takes place?

Having taken the time to prepare, plan and coordinate coaching the school was ready to have a go. Central to the peer coaching would be classroom observation, but, unusually, the teacher would coach the observer.

The school has deliberately adopted what it described as 'a reverse coach/coachee' model, and a process was built around this which involved a pre-conference, lesson observation and a post-conference.

Pre-conference

At the pre-conference the teacher who is coaching the observer explains the lesson purpose, what led to the lesson, and what will follow. Protocols, confidentiality and the specific focus of the coaching are established.

The observation

During the observation, spaces are provided where interaction and discussion take place. It is about 'coaching in action' and both the coach and coachee – or professional learner – are active participants and learners. The model is intended to separate the observations from more formal lesson observations which the teachers saw as 'someone else's agenda' and 'more about performance management'. What the teachers continually reiterated was the sheer joy of engaging with another colleague's teaching, from a learning and not an accountability starting point. One of the teachers commented 'We had never done it like this before; when we entered each other's room we became active participants. We engaged with the students and found opportunities to talk to each other during the lesson.'

Post-conference

These 'nitty gritty' issues provide the starting point for the post-conference conversations. The teachers described these as detailed conversations, which provided opportunities to reflect on the key points of the lesson. The person being coached describes their experience in the classroom, and then the coach begins the process of prompting and probing a reflective dialogue, to enable the professional learner to arrive at a deeper level of understanding of the experience and commit to new learning.

Wider learning

The school has also recently established a 'reflective practitioner group' which meets on a regular basis to enable colleagues involved in paired peer coaching to share their learning with a wider group by describing and discussing their experiences.

The group also uses videos of staff teaching.

'The videos are about us and that is why we volunteered. I don't really want to watch lessons that involve children from a school that is unrelated to the context in which I work. I want to see lessons that involve interruptions and, at times, negative behaviour. In our videos you see warts and all and that underpins what coaching is about.'

According to the teachers, peer coaching allows them to think about teaching and learning in ways which they hadn't previously done, and to try new ways of working without fear of failure.

Resourcing peer coaching

The commitment to collaboration is also evident in the time and resources that the school dedicates to coaching. The school guarantees that teacher time will be available for all stages – pre-meeting, classroom observations, post-conference and network time. This occurs both within and outside teaching time. Each school in the Manchester Collaborative Coaching School Network was given a budget of £2000 to introduce and support the development of coaching.

Overcoming obstacles

The school plans to involve all staff over the next few years. As part of this commitment it has tried to anticipate possible barriers and has said that it will:

- ensure there is the coaching expertise to support increased staff participation;
- protect and extend time for coaching;
- ensure increased staff participation in the network to maximise learning;
- consistently evaluate the impact of coaching on standards.

Skills and attributes

Staff commitment was seen to be essential for the success of the coaching programme. Staff members were also very aware of the need to develop the necessary skills to be effective coaches, and engaged in ongoing training within the network and as members of a school practitioner group. Their initial training involved working with an external consultant who was a very experienced coach. This was seen as essential and a very powerful influence.

One teacher described it as ‘inspirational and there is a need for that initial impetus’. Another teacher believed that to engage in coaching without the necessary skills can ‘actually do more harm than good’. Investing time in gaining the necessary skills involved the teachers in a series of training activities.

In describing their approach to coaching the headteacher said ‘It is a very collegiate approach, where everyone has a voice and more importantly knows they will be listened to’.

Links and networks

The school sees its involvement in the Manchester Collaborative Coaching School Network as fundamental in supporting activity. The involvement in the network ‘provides a rich source of learning, training and support’.

The school constantly looks to the network for ongoing support, stimulation and also celebration.

Key points to reflect on and relate to your current situation

There needs to be:

1. a culture of mutual support and commitment within the school, led by senior management;
2. an agreed model of delivery (e.g. peer-to-peer, collegiate approach);
3. a sense of trust, both in the process, confidentiality, and the people involved;
4. a review of strengths, weaknesses, successes and failures to build on experience;
5. a realistically resourced plan of action with appropriate milestones along a time line.

Source: This is an abridged version of a case study, taken from the Secondary National Strategy's *Coaching in Secondary Schools* DVD-ROM Ref: 0115-2006DVD-EN.