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How is Coaching Being Used Within School? Part 2

Does coaching have an impact on
improvement in school settings?

The second summary report on the research project undertaken at the
International Centre for the Study of Coaching at Middlesex University February
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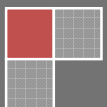


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Introduction

The rationale for the Middlesex research project on Coaching in Schools (2012) is:

- to support a collaborative focus and dialogue on coaching;
- to stimulate practitioner research and enquiry; and
- to help provide comparative data in terms of practice.

Our first summary report (May 2012) presented the findings of an in-depth survey on the use of coaching by leadership teams and teachers in school. In it we explored the experience of senior leaders in 99 schools and identified a wide range of opinions about what constitutes coaching as an activity and a corresponding diversity in the purpose and practice of coaching. The vast majority of schools (92%) were clear that 'supporting staff to develop their own solutions to work issues' was part of the purpose of coaching, yet simultaneously for about two-thirds of respondents, coaching also encompassed assessment of performance, giving feedback and mentoring. Coaching practice in school thus emerged as being underpinned by a range of purposes and using styles from the extrinsic to the intrinsic (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005)

The report also highlighted how coaching is being assimilated into other school improvement and professional development strategies – for example, lesson observations, professional development and performance management. A similar integration with practice emerged in the training of coaches with skills development programmes enhancing the core elements of professional practice such as listening, questioning, learning and reflection. Clearly both the skills and practice of coaching are contributing to major areas of professional work in school.

In this second summary report we consider the interviews with head teachers and senior leaders in a sample of these schools (self-selected) and take a more in-depth, qualitative perspective on how coaching is being used. Our initial analysis provides a distinct leadership perspective on:

- why do these leaders give such commitment and energy to coaching?
- what has been their experience of implementing coaching strategies?
- what do they consider to be the visible benefits and challenges?

Powerful themes emerge around power, equality and inclusion; leadership awareness and personal responsibility.

Throughout this Project, the voices of all have spoken passionately of a common, fundamental purpose: improving the quality of the learning of children, young people and adults. 'We have to make a difference.' This report draws together these voices and offers a picture of how coaching in schools is contributing to this agenda.

We would like to express our gratitude to those leaders in schools who have contributed to this second phase of the Project. We would also like to acknowledge again the support of Lancashire County Council.

We would be delighted to receive any further reflections or suggestions based on your own experience. Please do not hesitate to get in touch.

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Background

At a national level, there is policy support for leaders in schools to go beyond using coaching as a distinct practice intervention and to model coaching as a way of working (DfE/NCSL). However implementation of such significant culture change is not without its challenges.

In the first instance although coaching has generally been well received by teachers as part of their professional development there has been some criticism of initial practice in the area. The Newcastle University report (Lofthouse, 2010) for example explored how coaching was being used predominantly as a peer intervention to improve skills within the classroom. It highlighted issues in the leadership and management of coaching within schools: quality of practice, lack of coaching expertise and limited skills in developing own practice were all identified as problematic. This comes as an important reminder that coaching, not just in education but corporately and worldwide, is still at an early stage of practice development and there is little substantive evaluation on the effectiveness of coaching (Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011). Specifically schools need to be clear as to the purpose of a coaching intervention and an effective measure of effectiveness agreed prior to commencement. In this report we look at coaching in all its forms within school including as part of management and leadership development.

Secondly, the very essence of high quality coaching with its personal, often transformational, qualities (Critchley, 2010) may require a style of management and implementation that is different to larger scale models of rollout and cascade. Coaching focuses on the quality of conversations in the workplace and these qualities are rooted in organisational culture; they reflect people's thinking and experience around values, both espoused values (Schein, 2004) and values in action. The challenge for leadership is establishing a foundation for such trust and honesty in relationships. This indicates that the strategy designed for the implementation of coaching should take significant account of the culture and organisational structures within the school. We will consider both these elements in more detail later in this report.

Whatever the challenges for leadership at a strategic level, our survey showed a third of the schools we sampled (34%) currently identify coaching as central to the implementation of the school improvement strategy. And at an operational level, all the schools reported high levels of effectiveness for line manager coaching, peer coaching and internal coaching (coaching by a person who is not the line manager of the client).

Our first report offered findings on the key lessons learned about implementation. This second report now seeks to bring together a more in-depth perspective of what coaching means in terms of purpose and practice in the school context.

Project Design

The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to invite a sample of participants to consider their experience beyond the survey-level questions and to build a rich picture of current coaching practice within the complexity of the school environment. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the head teacher or a member of the senior leadership team from 18 of the original 99 schools. This second, smaller sample covered seven primary, four special, six secondary schools and one Sixth Form College.

The sample was selected on three criteria: participants had volunteered to take part in a research interview; their schools together provided a spread across the primary, special and secondary phases of education; and the schools were known from the survey to have had some experience of developing coaching. As in our previous report, we acknowledge that this sample has a bias that favours the principles and approaches of coaching. The purpose of the interviews was to explore current coaching practice where it is actually happening.

Interviews were structured around three broad areas:

- What do you consider to be coaching?
- How, in the broadest sense, is coaching a part of your school's learning and development strategy? What are the challenges and benefits that it presents to you and your school?
- What kind of evaluation process do you have in place?

Interviews were carried out under the university's ethical guidelines and in line with the Project's aims of stimulating practitioner enquiry. They were recorded with the interviewee's permission and transcribed. A thematic analysis was undertaken allowing the themes to emerge from an immersive reading and re-reading of the text. The purpose has been to capture both the content and the breadth of the participants' experience. There has been no attempt to generalise from individual responses.

Project Findings

Coaching was used within the interviewee's schools for a range of purposes. The most common was peer coaching for practice improvement but there was also a perceived increase in the use of coaching as a management style by senior leadership teams. They were using it as a way of working with their direct reports but also as an effective way of managing team meetings and joint project work as part of school improvement strategies.

All the interviewee's had their own perspective on the use and benefits of coaching within school and below we discuss the themes that emerged under the three areas of interest:

1. Characteristics of coaching

Openness to improvement

Coaching was seen to

'open people's eyes to greater potential'.

'People were coming to a more open understanding of how they might move things forward.'

Coaching was

'a process of being very open-minded oneself as a leader',

based on the premise that

'the way you work with people is the way they'll work with others'.

Coaching was indeed 'a way of working.'

Coaching was felt to stimulate real dialogue with staff and so it was considered important for the member of staff engaging in the coaching, to understand the nature of the process and the way in which it encourages deep reflective thinking.

'Coaching engages the client in a series of questions, in reflection. It allows them to use their inner resources. The agenda is in the hands of the client. The client brings their own challenge.'

Non-judgemental

Coaching was non-judgemental, it involved trusting staff and gave a sense of greater equality, of 'all being in the same boat'.

'People really like it because it works without people feeling put down. A coaching model empowers, it liberates the talent which has usually been suppressed, people warm to it.'

This was felt to be particularly important where there is a historical culture of heavy-handed interventions, of perceived management ruthlessness and a feeling of 'being under the cosh'. In a world of ever-increasing pressure and expectation on public sector leadership, coaching stood out as a leadership activity that was both enjoyable and very satisfying. Coaching was seen as important for leadership development and for extending leadership styles beyond 'instructive leadership'.

Intrinsic responsibility

The notions of responsibility and accountability emerged strongly. The key element of the underpinning philosophy was that people are accountable: 'responsibility rests with the learner'. Whereas processes of responsibility and accountability are often based on external judgements, coaching worked towards a sense of intrinsic professional responsibility.

Coaching was also seen to 'put people on an equal footing'. People take on greater ownership, which in itself leads to better outcomes. There was a spirit of inclusion and a whole-school approach. All staff can be involved. 'Everyone has been trained. We use coaching all the time.' Teachers and support staff trained together, with no distinctions of role and hierarchy.

For another head, coaching helped to promote collaborative working across different phases and teams in the school, with staff working on understanding someone else's perspective. Staff also came up with their own ideas for developing coaching.

2. Contribution to learning and development strategy (with challenges and benefits)

Leadership

As a leadership strategy, heads and senior leaders talked with clear conviction. Coaching was seen as 'a great tool for change'. Coaching had been very powerful, for example, in working with the core standards and in helping people to reflect on their own practice. Coaching was seen as useful on both an individual level and as a methodology in team meetings and with groups.

Coaching was effective in dealing with 'the hard things for leaders'.

'Coaching can help work things out.'

For one head teacher, the leadership question was to decide when to adopt a coaching approach. It was a question of reading situations and of knowing 'when to go into a coaching mode'.

Resources

In the real, vibrant life of schools, creating the necessary conditions of space and time for coaching to take place were indeed a challenge. The conditions for developing real reflection and trust were not seen as part of the existing culture, and yet were important as the very drivers for change.

Along with the underpinning conviction and belief in coaching from this sample, came a determination not to be deflected by resource constraints.

'One of the biggest challenges is time, but we don't let that get in the way.'

'We're not going to be beaten by that.'

At another level, the challenge was moving from a personal conviction as a leader in the power of coaching to extending the thinking and practice across a school:

'at the time I felt on my own and the challenge was the whole notion of using coaching as a means of looking at the way we do things...A crucial milestone was when the senior team felt fully behind the principles of coaching and committed to their own training.'

There was also the identification of the need not to overload people – in some instances each coach had only one person to coach at any one time. At a practice level, there was a tension to switch into mentoring because of school pressures and in search of ‘quicker route’.

Supporting learning

Coaching was seen as a key tool for teaching and learning development. Peer coaching was being used with pupils. It helped with pupil assessment and learning. It was connected with Philosophy for Children (P4C) in coaching pupils to ask significant questions. It stimulated well the reflective, questioning process to help pupils learn. Head teachers had also given serious attention to their own learning, training and development, often at Masters level.

3) Evaluation of coaching

What did schools value in coaching?

We asked interviewees specifically about the evaluation of coaching both from a personal and an organisational perspective. The purpose of the coaching varied as did the extent and timescale of implementation. Therefore the comments presented here are chosen to illustrate the range of experience of the interviewees and their perception of the value of coaching within their leadership. Further in-depth analysis will be presented in the final report.

‘I’ve found it the most powerful strategy in teaching for 32 years.’

‘There have been benefits for people, for individuals, for relationships, for learning in the school. We’ve seen changes in the skilling up of teachers, in motivation. Coaching has helped deal with the difficult problems for real. The numbers of people who are requesting coaching have increased. People are realising it is not a soft option, realising they may need to dig deeper than they are used to. People are seeing coaching having an impact on their colleagues, both personally and professionally.’

This quote highlights awareness that some may perceive coaching as a ‘soft option’. Some interviewees identified that others in school had a concern that coaching was;

‘too woolly, too vague, too fluffy, that the structure would not be kept tight enough.’

In a school, recognised by Ofsted as providing outstanding leadership and management with a coaching culture, the head saw people beginning to appreciate that coaching was not ‘woolly’ but led to ‘very precise benefits’. Group coaching had led to people feeling fully engaged and had had a very real impact. People felt listened to. The head however recognised that time is needed for these benefits to become explicit. In this case it had taken three years for people to begin to take on the coaching agenda.

One head teacher took an inductive approach to evaluation. The senior team in the school looked at ‘what’s worked well?’ ‘What are the areas of the school which have proved successful based on hard data?’ They then considered what factors had contributed to or exemplified that success:

- good will
- excitement
- a sense of innovation
- seeing the value of activities
- celebrating strengths and allowing space for individuality
- gathering support
- keeping all informed and included.

These factors were identified as stemming from the adopted coaching approach. The school's analysis highlighted the personal and relational qualities which had been developed through coaching and which were seen to be the essential contributors to successful change. It is of interest that these factors were also considered difficult to assess.

Another school valued the contribution coaching made to reflective practice, with the development of staff thinking and the emergence of considered- rather than 'off the top of the head',-responses. Coaching had led to an appreciation of the real depth of professional practice, far beyond a mechanistic or transactional concept of work and endeavour.

This approach recognised the huge personal resources and commitment invested by people in this work. It recognised the depth of personal understanding that is needed to learn and develop, and to bring about effective improvements in schools. One school spoke of results stemming from improvements in the self-esteem and self worth of staff. Emotional energy was part of this picture with the coaching exploring emotions and feelings as well as practicalities allowing for expression of these feelings.

'It's not necessarily the practical things, the resourcing – those things can usually be overcome relatively easily. It's working with feelings and emotions within development, the extra responsibility in leading teams, leading change. Coaching as a process allows this to happen.'

Coaching was considered by many as a method to help develop trust within working groups. From the leadership perspective, such an emerging culture was all the more important for being situated within a wider, national culture of high pressure and accountability. Importantly though, there was no attempt from any source in this research to deny the need for accountability.

As ever with effective culture change, there was a re-framing of timescales away from the quick result or the quick solution towards longer-term, deep-reaching strategies. One head teacher, recognising this change in timescale, saw her school 'still in the infancy' of the programme to develop coaching. Yet the same head teacher also recognised the huge short-term impact from coaching, corroborated by Ofsted, of the improvement in teachers graded previously as satisfactory or unsatisfactory within a six to eight week cycle. Mentoring had been tried in the past but had not had the same impact. With mentoring approaches, teachers had been trying to do what the mentor wanted or suggested, without necessarily believing in the changes and without ownership.

Conclusions

The findings in this report highlight some dominant themes around trust, openness and relationships and provide evidence of coaching being a tool for change. It is perceived as having a significant impact at the personal/interpersonal level and there is a growing indication of effective contribution to school improvement. This is in agreement with emerging controlled studies into the effectiveness of coaching for leadership in school (Grant, Green, & Rynsaardt, 2010).

The lived experience described by the voices of these school leaders is of schools turning to coaching as a strategy to help provide the necessary foundation of relationship, trust and honesty for real school improvement. Delivering the conditions for coaching has in turn created a microcosm of a different culture; a different sense of relationship; a different pace and energy and a different way of working. For such schools the key shift appears to be away from modelling leadership within schools on the dominant macro model of command and control towards a model of leadership based on belief and responsibility drawing on the principles and approaches of coaching. An added benefit for those operating under the relentlessly demanding pressures of headship was that coaching is seen as something good, enjoyable, interesting and professionally

very satisfying. In commercial and other public sector organisations coaching has provided a process for similar cultural shifts (Hawkins & Smith, 2006).

These considerations may go some way to explaining why schools experience the same difficulty as other organisations in evaluating or isolating coaching as a single factor in school improvement (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). In essence coaching appears successful in areas of complex working, where for example self-esteem and self-image underpin performance.

The effectiveness of coaching within this sample of schools invites further exploration of the connections between coaching and leadership. There appears scope for deepening further our understanding of the connections between the principles and practices of coaching and some key concepts in leadership practice: power, control, accountability, individual and team effectiveness, engagement and motivation (Carey, Philippon, & Cummings, 2011).

There is an issue for leaders in deciding when to adopt a coaching approach. What this report does not explore are the conditions and criteria under which a leader might make such a decision. Is it a matter of leadership style and school culture? Is it context specific to the person, the situation and to contingency? What understanding of coaching is in place? Who decides the move into a coaching conversation? What protocols are in place to support effective coaching?

Our initial analysis of the interviews strongly suggests that a clear purpose to the coaching is needed if it is to be accepted and used by teachers and senior leaders in school and not thought of as 'woolly' and a soft option. This purpose can then be used to drive the evaluation of the work thereby further building credibility with staff and allowing commitment of valuable resources; not least of which is time. Even if we were to gain such clarity our results strongly suggest there is no single implementation strategy emerging from practice. Indeed it is clear that leaders are identifying that 'one size does not fit all' and that elements of school culture such as size, management style, organisational infrastructure will impact upon: the way coaching should be introduced; the mode of coaching used and the purposes which can be achieved. The most common strategy was an emergent one where coaching is supported as an elective option for professional development and support for it grows in an organic manner. The structured whole school implementation where coaching is introduced as a requirement and managed centrally in the organisation was less used. A tailored mix of the two options was used by a number of schools where coaching is supported proactively through training and supervision but its practice is less formally managed. This continuum of strategies mirrors those found in the private sector (Knights & Poppleton, 2008) where the pre-coaching culture determines the most appropriate mode of implementation.

Irrespective of the implementation strategy there was a strong agreement between interviewees that development of a coaching culture took a significant time with two to three years being a common estimate. Such investment in resources for returns in the medium term identifies that coaching needs leadership. It needs a decision that identifies to the whole organisation 'we are going to do this' and then a senior leader to drive the implementation with belief, passion and conviction. Finally the implementation must be monitored over time and readjusted as the inevitable issues appear.

It is clear that all the School Leaders we spoke to still found the benefits of the culture change to be worth it in terms of attainment by pupils as well as staff development.

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