DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 177 SP 041 247

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TITLE	Peer Coaching in a Professional Development School: The Value of Learning Together as Teachers and Professors.
PUB DATE	2002-04-01
NOTE	12p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; College School Cooperation; Collegiality; Elementary Secondary Education; *Faculty Development; Higher Education; *Partnerships in Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *Professional Development Schools; *Teacher Collaboration
IDENTIFIERS	*Peer Coaching

ABSTRACT

This case study chronicled ways that one Professional Development School (PDS) partnership implemented peer coaching as a vehicle for promoting collaboration in order to improve classroom instruction. In the first phase of a 4-year study, teachers, administrators, and university faculty developed procedures for creating peer coaching teams and examined the perceptions of participants as they began the process. Data collection methods included interviews with the participants at the beginning and end of the study, informal interviews, open-ended questionnaires, meeting notes, observation notes, teacher reflections, and coaching logs. These major themes dominated the research findings: collaboration, collegiality, communication, and cooperation. Teachers also expressed some concerns, mainly regarding time and scheduling issues. Implications for future research are discussed. (Author/SM)

Peer coaching in a professional development school: The value of learning together as teachers and professors

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Abstract

This case study chronicled ways that one PDS partnership implemented peer coaching as a vehicle for promoting collaboration in order to improve classroom instruction. In this first phase of a four-year study, teachers, administrators, and university faculty developed procedures for creating peer coaching teams and examined the perceptions of participants as they began the process. Data collections methods included interviews with the participants at the beginning and at the end of the study, informal interviews, open-ended questionnaires, meeting notes, observation notes, teacher reflections, and coaching logs. These major themes dominated the research findings: collaboration, collegiality communication, and cooperation. Teachers also expressed some concerns, mainly time and scheduling issues. Implications for future research are discussed.

Purpose

This case study chronicled ways that one PDS (Professional Development School) partnership implemented peer coaching as a vehicle for promoting collaboration in order to improve classroom instruction. In this first phase of a four-year study, teachers, administrators, and university faculty developed procedures for creating peer-coaching teams and examined the perceptions of participants as they began the process. The following question guided the research:

> How does involvement in academic coaching affect professional development with regard to teachers' implementation of new instructional strategies and collaboration with other teachers?

Theoretical perspective

A growing number of reports on PDS partnerships and school reform have emphasized the need for congruence between purpose and practice. The researchers used the Holmes Group's (1990) definition of Professional Development School (PDS): "a school for the development of novice professionals, for continuing development of experienced professionals, and for the research and development of the teaching profession" (p. 1), Valli, Cooper, and Frankes (1997) insisted that a true PDS must feature three systematic commitments: teacher preparation, professional development, and research (p. 252). Their review of research in relationship to these goals identified "a large gap between realities and expectations yet to be fulfilled" (p. 290). Earlier, Baker and Showers (1984) identified a similar gap between professional development and classroom practice. Well-researched curriculum and teaching models did not find their way into general practice because of a lack of support for implementation of the strategies. Other reports have been more encouraging. For example, an analysis of the impact of the Benedum Collaborative in West Virginia over an eight-year period demonstrates that productive, collaborative relationships can develop over time (Saab, Steel, & Shive, 1997).

Peer coaching is a promising vehicle for promoting such relationships. Joyce and Showers (1996) have conducted a series of studies that show that teachers who were

involved in a coaching relationship "practiced new skills and strategies more frequently and applied them more readily than did their counterparts who worked alone..."(p.14). They also exhibited greater long-term retention of new strategies and demonstrated more appropriate use of new teaching models over time.

Not only does academic coaching prove useful for implementing new teaching strategies, but it also serves as a way to implement reform of content standards. Rogers, Guess, Robertson, and Van Oast (2000) found that peer coaching enabled more collaboration among participants. Coaches in their study focused on three specific areas: providing continued support for teachers, expanding discussions about student work, and developing leadership skills of department heads (p.21). "Teachers report that this type of job-embedded professional development has been the most enlightening of their careers" (p.21).

Peer coaching has also proven beneficial as a method of professional development for novice (student or first year) teachers. Little and Robinson (1997) advocate a program designed with a novice teacher and a master teacher paired where the goal is to develop and enhance teaching and mentoring skills across school settings through peer coaching. The use of reflective journals enabled the teachers to discuss their own plans, decisions, and revisions made within the classroom context. These procedures enabled the participants to implement changes in their teaching in an environment based on nonjudgmental collaboration and collegial communication arising from the peer coaching model. "The benefits of peer coaching, reflective problem solving, and solution finding were seen as vehicles for encouraging change" (p.438).

These models of peer coaching provided a framework for participants in this study to develop a positive, effective, and non-threatening way to improve teaching in an urban middle school setting.

Data Collection

Fifteen teachers and two administrators, two professors and two teacher education doctoral students participated in this case study. All participants were members of the PDS partnership. Following two daylong sessions devoted to the concept of peer coaching, participants formed three-member teams comprised of a beginning or novice teacher, a "coaching" teacher, and a university researcher. For the rest of the spring

semester, teams met two or three times a month to discuss instructional issues, plan and observe demonstration lessons, and teach together. Three pre-service interns participated in these activities with their cooperating teachers.

At the beginning of the project, researchers interviewed each of the coaches and administrators individually. During large group sessions, team meetings, and demonstration lessons, researchers functioned as participant observers and collected field notes. At the end of the semester, researchers conducted focus group interviews with participants. Other data sources include informal interviews and an open-ended questionnaire used to glean the participants' interpretations of this professional development experience. During the month of June, the research team analyzed data to identify patterns of performance and issues for continued exploration in the next phase of the project.

At the onset of the program, the coaches were interviewed to gain insight to their expectations of the program. The principal and an assistant principal were also interviewed. All subjects interviewed were asked the same open ended questions. The responses were coded by emerging themes from the interviews. Predetermined themes were not used. Responses were coded by the following themes that emerged in participants' responses: collegiality, student achievement, standard course of study, negative feelings, pulling the school together as a unit, view of teachers as professionals, mentor relationships, and best practices.

Through the teacher interviews, two goals emerged. 1) Teachers hoped that the triad program would improve student achievement through best practices. 2) Teachers hoped to increase collegiality.

Results

By using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Corbin, 1997) several themes emerged from the data. In their initial interviews teachers expressed hopes that peer coaching would improve student achievement, increase collegiality, increase the view of teachers as professionals, help teachers to form relationships, and help them incorporate "best practices" into their teaching. A common strand throughout the initial interviews was that teaching is often a solitary function. Very rarely do teachers get the opportunity to watch others teach and to discuss that teaching. The thought of observing others to

build professional knowledge was quite appealing. Also through communication with one another, teachers hoped to gain perspectives on what was taught in earlier grades and what they are preparing students for in later grades. Lastly, teachers hoped that they would gain perspective on how the children developmentally change in behavior and skills from year to year so that their expectations and instructional practices might be more appropriate.

One concern was that some staff members would have negative feelings about the coaches and would perceive them as "bossy." Another item that all of the coaches agreed upon was that they were not in the program to be dispensers of knowledge, but rather as collaborative learners. Administrators touched on the same themes as teachers, but had a slightly different focus. They discussed how collegiality among the teams would lead to greater alignment with the standard course of study provided by the state. Interestingly, the teachers did not mention the standard course of study in their concerns; they were primarily concerned with instructional strategies.

At the end of a semester, participants reported a range of experiences. Two-thirds of the participants expressed positive perceptions. Those who felt that their peer coaching teams functioned successfully suggested that their expectations were met regarding collegiality, collaboration, and communication. Coaching teachers and university faculty who expressed positive perceptions emphasized the collaborative nature of instructional planning and the heightened engagement of students during demonstration lessons. One participant stated, "Sharing ideas and watching each other gives us a frame of reference. It gives you strategies that you didn't think of and seeing ideas in practice."

Faculty noted that teaching together gave them a practical and meaningful way to try out lesson ideas with middle school students. Novice teachers who reported successful experience said it was especially beneficial to observe a veteran with excellent classroom management. The more experienced teachers saw themselves as guides to open conversation and worked collaboratively with lesson planning, instruction, and classroom management. Doctoral students studying to become teacher educators practiced qualitative research methods to understand peer coaching from the participants' point of view.

Participants who expressed disappointment that their expectations were not met, attributed their frustration to barriers including time constraints and scheduling conflicts. The unsuccessful teams proposed ideas to increase opportunities for success in the future. Only one novice teacher refused to participate due to her temporary status at the school.

Discussion

Nestled in a blue-collar neighborhood is Jackson Middle School. Housed within the walls is a dedicated staff determined to raise achievement scores. Currently, the principal reports that 62.7 % of the students are considered low-performing by the end of grade, standardized state testing program. The socio-economic makeup of Jackson includes approximately 70 % of the students are entitled to free and reduced lunch. The ethnic make-up of the school is approximately 80 % minority students. At the inception of the program, the coaches and two administrators were interviewed to gain their expectations from the program. The two goals that emerged were increasing student achievement through best practices and increasing collegiality.

A common strand throughout the teacher interviews was that teaching is a solitary function. Very rarely do teachers get the opportunity to watch others teach and to discuss that teaching. Most noted that they had not watched someone else teach since their own student teaching experience. The thought of observing others to build knowledge of best practices was quite appealing. "Sharing ideas and watching each other gives us a frame of reference. It gives you strategies that you didn't think of and seeing ideas in practice." This observation and then facilitated discussion of what was experienced while teaching is crucial for growth. "Vygotsky stresses the importance of social interaction, such as discussions and dialog in small groups, as the primary method of producing cognitive-structural growth in the learner" (Sprinthall, Reinamn, Theis-Sprinthall, 1996, p. 692). Thus, the discussion component about the observations is key to helping teachers transfer best practices into their own classrooms. Joyce and Showers (1996) also expressed the importance of discussion about practices and the struggles of successes of instituting them. This discussion is vital in teacher success and is so often a missing component.

Teachers were quite receptive to talking and working with other teachers and forming relationships. One teacher commented that their triad partner was in another building. Through this project, there is a chance to get to know a person that normally

would not be seen on a day to day basis. Many of the teachers discussed that there is very little time to focus on relationships in the daily rush of teaching and that the relationship-building was a strong component of the process. "We will meet someone new on our staff, someone we didn't really know before and that will bring the staff closer together." Through these communications and relationships, teachers also hoped that the students see that teachers work together for their development.

Best practices and student achievement were connected to collegiality. Through sharing, the teachers hope both the collegiality and the teaching practices of the school improve, through discussion of both successes and failures. "We, as teachers, need a pat on the back. Reassurance. Be there to listen to problems, encourage each other." By increasing collegiality, it is hoped that instruction will improve. This desired dialog is not limited to Jackson alone. It is also hoped that discussion between schools can occur and collegiality can be built in that way. "I think we will be meeting and talking and sharing classroom experiences. Like our visit to Topsail, we could learn methods from other school visits."

Coaches feared being conceived as bossy and that this perception would interfere with developing collegiality. This concern is quite valid. Joyce and Showers (1996) eliminated the evaluative observation component of their model of coaching as they found that it interfered with open communication. One teacher in the triad project commented that the earlier name of the project (coaches) implies that one teacher is superior while another is inferior. There was an over-all fear of being seen as authoritative and resentment arising. One teacher stated, "I don't want to be seen as authoritative and telling people what to do and being bossy." Because some of the "coaching" teachers had four years, or less, of experience, they also did not consider themselves experts. Rather, they wanted to work collaboratively with others so that they, themselves, could grow in their knowledge of good practice.

Some of the teachers viewed the triad in terms of mentoring. Some perceived it as a co-mentoring, where the teachers work to nurture each other, "...to bring out the strengths in others. Professionalism-cooperation-give positive feedback and helping someone to capitalize on strengths and work on weaknesses." By working together, practice can be improved. Teachers with longer years of service, saw themselves as

mentors to the new teachers they were paired with in the triad. "New teachers need a mentor...if you are a helping hand, that's what I'd like." The more experienced teacher saw themselves as guides to open conversation and work cooperatively with lesson planning, instruction, and classroom management. Although the concept of mentoring differed from new to seasoned teachers, it is noteworthy that the concept appears in many of the participants' views of the program.

Through communication with one another, content is explored. The hope from teachers is that they gain perspective on what was taught in each grade level. Higher grade teachers benefit by knowing what earlier grade teachers have taught so the concepts can be built upon. Teachers of earlier grades benefit from learning what they are preparing students for in later grades. Also, teachers hoped that they would gain perspective on how the children developmentally change in behavior and skills from year to year so that their expectations are appropriate.

In the principal and assistant principal interviews, two elements emerged that were not present in the teacher interviews. The first is the Standard Course of Study. The assistant principal viewed these conversations as a way for teachers to talk about their curriculum and align it with the standard course of study. It is also seen as a way to gain class control. As teachers learn to align curriculum and improve practices, there will be less discipline problems because students will be on task and actively learning. The assistant principal stated, "Also, as students' academic levels raise from good instruction, they will behave better. It is because students will be on grade level, they will not be bored from lack of challenge or overwhelmed by work that is too hard." The principal stated that, "I'm hoping we will get mastery of the Standard Course of Study so that when end-of-grade tests come around, that we'll fell comfortable that we've done as best we can for the kids that we have." The administration has very high hopes that the faculty will focus their conversation around student achievement through aligning their class lessons around the standard course of study.

The second expectation is that peer coaching will pull the school together as a team once the collegiality is gained. The principal stated, "...Instructional leadership has to be a shared responsibility from key people in the building. That 's the whole idea behind our academic coaches." The growing collegiality will be the agent of change that

will pull the school together as one unit. The assistant principal states that the exchange between teachers would be and opportunity for both teachers in the triad to exchange ideas, share information, and make the staff at school feel like "we have a well-oiled machine." With teachers talking and working together, the principal feels that school improvement will increase. "This school has been limited in its success. I'm of the opinion that if we establish a kind of relationship between teachers, then that's when we'll start making the kind of gains and achievement in kids that we're looking for." The principal also hopes that teacher retention will increase with the gained collegiality.

Though there are some differing expectations between administrators and teachers, the commonalties of collegiality and growth in student achievement through best practices is consistent between the two groups. The outlook for the program is mostly optimistic. The principal sums up the participants feelings in his own thoughts about the program, "I'm hoping it will make it that inviting place where kids want to come, teachers are happy to work at, and that education and instruction goes on. A place where innovative teaching is taking place, a place where kids are energized about learning teachers aren't afraid to make mistakes, teachers aren't afraid to let other people see the mistakes that they make, and the opportunity for growth would be boundless as to what I'd like to see happen."

Implications

Results from this study illustrate the potential value of peer coaching for promoting dialogue between teachers and among teacher educators in a non-threatening manner. The themes of collaboration, communication, and collegiality emerged from the data as what teachers and teacher educators value in effective professional development experiences and what they hope to model for future educators. Peer coaching became the vehicle for improved instructional practice as a result of these new opportunities for communication and collaboration.

Formal and informal discussions provided opportunities to share instructional ideas and provide stronger support for each other. Teachers were quite receptive to communicating and collaborating with other teachers with the goal of improving their own instruction at the center of the conversations. Through collaboration the teachers

expressed the desire for increased collegiality whereby professional development would be validated through classroom implementation of new instructional strategies.

Barriers to this dialogue were predominately organizational (scheduling and timing). As participants extend this initiative to include more of the faculty, administrators can address these issues. Researchers will continue to chronicle interactions. Results may help participants in other professional development schools to consider peer coaching as a valid means to enhance collaboration toward instructional improvement.

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