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How can coaching make a positive impact within educational settings?

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Abstract

There is growing acceptance that large-scale educational reform is needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The contribution that coaching can make in these settings has been the focus of recent discussions and research. Much of the research comes from the UK, USA and Australia, and these will be reviewed to provide an overview of some of the approaches that have been used. A systematic literature search has been done using the keywords “coaching” and “education”, followed by a manual search based on references. Articles, books and reports were read in order to extract the most relevant and the most interesting studies. There is an emerging evidence-base that coaching is a powerful tool to support learning and development for students, teachers, school leaders and their educational establishments. A variety of coaching approaches have been used successfully. These approaches are outlined: behavioral coaching, solution-focused coaching, cognitive and cognitive-behavioral coaching, instructional coaching, executive coaching, peer coaching, and positive organizational leadership. The coaching approaches are also reviewed based on their focus on the three main educational actors: students, teachers, and school leaders. The contributions made by positive psychology for creating learning cultures within schools are also reviewed. All coaching approaches can provide valuable contributions, but ultimately school improvement will fail if coaching remains on an individual level. Therefore, systems of collective and collaborative learning are necessary to generate a collective learning culture.

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1. Background and purpose of the study

There is growing acceptance internationally that large scale educational reform is needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Educational establishments need to provide young people with the skills and competencies needed to succeed and flourish in this rapidly changing world. The conventional transmission model of education is being called into question, as indeed are the focus and outcomes of education. While academic achievement is and should remain an important facet of education, a more holistic approach to education is being called for (Seligman, 2004; Cohen, 2006; Huitt, 2011). As coaching is “a holistic multifaceted approach to learning and change” (Skiffington & Zeus, 2003, p. 30), it has a key role to play in education: in the classroom, in the professional development of key actors in the educational system, and in the creation of learning cultures.

While schools and universities are by no means the only social institutions responsible for educating, this paper focuses on these and the contribution that coaching can make in these settings. Much of the research comes from the

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UK, USA and Australia and these will be referred to provide an overview of some of the approaches that have been used. A systematic literature search has been done using the keywords “coaching” and “education”, followed by a manual search based on references. Articles, books and reports were read in order to extract the most relevant and the most interesting studies.

2. Critical review of the coaching approaches

Coaching is a powerful tool for personal change and learning. At the core of the coaching approach is the facilitation of learning using active listening and inquiry and providing appropriate challenge and support. There is already a shift in the teacher role in educational settings from instructor to facilitator (Griffiths, 2005) using a coaching Socratic approach wherein teachers are beginning to help students “to learn rather than teaching them” (Whitmore, 2002). Coaching aims to support the development of students, teachers, school leaders and the educational institutions of which they are part.

Several coaching approaches have been used successfully. While they are listed separately below, they are often combined to take a blended approach.

2.1. Behavioral coaching

Behavioral approaches are underpinned by a goal focus and action-orientation, and problem-solving models such as GROW (Alexander & Renshaw, 2005) and TGROW (Downey, 2003), are used extensively in educational settings and it is the coaching approach advocated by the UK education sector (Creasy & Paterson, 2005). Behavioral coaching is easy to teach and learn, and is therefore able to be used by students (Passmore & Brown, 2009), teachers (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green et al., 2007) and school leaders (Simkins et al., 2006). There is evidence that behavioral coaching works (Grant, 2001) for school students to decrease exam anxiety and increase test performance, and for undergraduate students for managing stress (Short, Kinman, & Baker, 2010). The behavioral approach is criticized for not taking sufficient account of cognitive-emotional factors, unconscious material and the systemic features impacting learning. Many authors (Grant, 2001; Passmore, 2006; Palmer & Szymanska, 2007) advocate for a blended approach which includes cognitive and/or cognitive-behavioral approaches, as learning can often be blocked due to unhelpful beliefs or thinking errors. These approaches are more sophisticated and require more extensive training and may therefore be less accessible to all actors within the education system.

2.2. Solution-focused coaching

Solution-focused coaching is easily learnt and can be widely used by all actors in the education system and has been used successfully in blended approaches to developing life-skills. It empowers coachees to draw upon their own resources in developing solutions to problems. Solution-focused coaching has been criticized for being too simplistic when problems are complex, or superficial in the sense that underlying problems may not be addressed and for these reasons long-term learning and sustained change may not occur. However blended with other approaches, it has been shown to enhance students’ problem-solving skills, coping skills, resilience, well-being, study skills and learning goals achievement as well as decreasing depression (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green et al., 2007).

2.3. Cognitive and cognitive-behavioral coaching

Cognitive-behavioral approaches which focus on emotions and behaviour looking at links and causalities can help build psychological resilience, enhanced performance, increased well-being and reduction in stress (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007). Cognitive coaching, which emphasizes reflection, self-analysis and self-evaluation is used to assist teachers to examine their thinking behind their teaching practices (Costa, 1992; Costa & Garmston, 2004).

2.4. Instructional coaching

Instructional coaching is a specialist and content-based approach which has been shown to be effective in supporting teachers' professional development and higher student outcomes (Cornett & Knight, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 1987; Knight, 2009; Vogt & Rogalla, 2009). Instructional coaching and coaching initiatives based on this model have been used in the USA, e.g. Pathways to Success (Knight, 2004a), PAHSCI Project (Brown, 2006), Passport to Success (Knight, 2007b), Literacy Collaborative (Rebora, 2012), and are delivering promising results for teacher development and ultimately student achievement. They are effective but are complex to implement as they rely on multiple stakeholders, e.g. national and local government, school culture, principals, and teacher uptake to ensure they are effective. Coaches require extensive training (usually about one year) and ongoing continuous development, and the programs are costly to implement (Fullan & Knight, 2011; Rebora, 2012).

2.5. Executive coaching

Executive coaching or coaching for educational leadership that supports head teachers, principals, and teachers transitioning into management roles as stand-alone interventions or integrated into wider continuing professional development (CPD) programs are in use around the world (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Simkins, Coldwell, Caillau, Finlayson, & Morgan, 2006; Bush, Kiggundu, & Moorosi, 2011).

2.6. Peer coaching

Peer coaching is also present in educational settings and takes two broad forms. Reciprocal peer coaching between pairs of teachers, and the instructional coaching approach (Knight, 2004a; Kowal & Steiner, 2007) cited above, which supports teachers in implementing research-based teaching practices. These coaching relationships are characterized by equal relationship involving modeling, observation, feedback, reflective dialogue, and classroom practice.

2.7. Positive organizational scholarship

Positive psychology and particularly positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) have yielded coaching approaches aimed at supporting change at individual, group, and organizational levels, e.g. appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastara, 1990), appreciative coaching (Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008), and strengths-based coaching (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011). The focus is on a more holistic view of education building on the strengths of the individual or the system, and developing skills that go beyond the traditional academic subjects to enhance wellbeing. Indeed more wellbeing "is synergistic with better learning" (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009), so creating a virtuous learning cycle. Projects such as the Geelong Grammar School Project (GCS) in Australia and the Pennsylvania Resilience Program (PRP) in the USA have delivered excellent results. These again are big initiatives, with multiple stakeholders and are costly and complex to implement.

As discussed above, a variety of coaching approaches are in use in educational settings, and there is a growing evidence-base emerging that coaching is valuable. There appear to be two broad strands. The first is the more "traditional" coaching approach where the coach does not need to have specialist knowledge of teaching practices and educational setting specificities, and the second is highly specialized in terms of content, educational substance and leadership for learning. Both approaches have valuable contributions to make in educational settings.

3. Application of coaching approaches to main educational actors

3.1. Coaching for teachers

Teachers' practices in the classroom are the greatest predictor of student achievement (Knight, 2009; Bush, 2009). Focusing on supporting teachers' professional development will therefore have the most significant impact on student outcomes. Research shows that coaching is an effective strategy for ongoing teacher development (e.g. Cornett & Knight, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 1987; Knight, 2009).

Peer coaching or mentoring has been said to be a powerful way to transfer learning in teacher professional development (Shower & Joyce, 1987). Developmental coaching for teachers needs to rely on both peer and specialist support. "Collaborating with colleagues to sustain commitment to learning and relate new approaches to every day practice; and seeking out specialist expertise to extend skills and knowledge and to model good practice" (Cordingley, 2005).

In the UK, the National Framework makes references to mentoring, specialist coaching and collaborative coaching as ways to do this. Collaborative coaching typically involves dyads or triads of teachers who come together to share experiences and practices, reflection, offer support, feedback and encouragement. The practice allows internalized knowledge and experience to be shared. As dialogue by itself does not bring about effective development, active experimentation with class room practice is also a vital ingredient to building learning cultures that support risk-taking and innovation. Specialist coaching reinforces these aspects and supports the development of specific teaching competencies and strategies and their implementation in the classroom.

Instructional coaching focuses on providing a comprehensive framework for instructional excellence in four areas: classroom management, content planning, instruction and assessment for learning (Knight, 2009). Instructional coaching is directed toward individual teachers in their own classroom and has been shown to have a positive impact on attitudes of teachers, increases in skill transfer and implementation of new strategies in the classroom, increased feelings of teacher-efficacy, as well as improved student achievement. In Switzerland, science education teachers who received individualized content-focused coaching in their own classrooms increased their adaptive teaching competency with regard to planning and their students showed higher learning outcomes compared to the control group (Vogt & Rogalla, 2009). From these selected examples, instructional coaching and contents-based approaches to teacher development get results. They are most successful when certain conditions are met; where there is equality of partnership and mutual learning between coach and coachee, where learning and development are supported and lead by school leaders, where teachers participate on a voluntary basis, where sufficient time is allowed for the activity, where there is quality dialogue and reflective space, and where the coaching is embedded within the school system and closely related to the real-time needs and practices of the teachers in their classrooms.

Peer coaching, both expert coaching and reciprocal coaching, are also an effective way to develop pre-service teachers (Lu, 2010). Peer coaching for pre-service teachers has been shown to improve instructional skills (Hasbrouck, 1997; Mallette et al., 1999; Bowman & McCormick, 2000), enabled student teachers to focus on student learning rather than techniques for class room management (Jenkins et al., 2002), improved student learning outcomes (Mallette, Mabeady, & Harper, 1999), improved teacher professionalism (Hasbrouck, 1997), and increased teacher accountability and commitment (Ovens, 2004).

3.2. Coaching for school leaders

Accountability pressures on school leaders are growing in many countries. Expectations of government, local communities, parents and wider public add to the complexity of leading in educational contexts. "Only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that leads to sustained improvement in student achievement" (Fullan, 2002). Educational leadership has its specificities and as with teacher professional development, coaching for school leaders similarly requires developmental, specialist and collaborative coaching approaches (Duncan & Stock, 2010).

There is emerging evidence that high quality leadership makes a significant difference to school improvement and student learning outcomes (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Bush, 2009). While classroom teaching has the most important impact on student learning, school leadership comes a good second. Likewise "the development of leadership talent throughout institutions of higher learning is fast becoming a

strategic imperative” (Hill, 2005). Though there is not a large body of evidence for coaching effectiveness for higher education leaders, coaching programs have been found to have been useful (Wilkes & Telfair, 2008).

More often than not, leaders in schools and higher education are teachers or lecturers who have moved into leadership roles. This transition requires preparation and development (Bush, 2006). In England, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) was established in 2000 to drive national focus for enhancing leadership development in schools. Coaching is integrated into many of the national leadership programs such as the Leading from the Middle (LftM) and the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) (Simkins et al., 2006).

For more specialized educational leader development, Oakland district established a leadership coaching department and a Transformational Leadership Coaching Team comprised of former teachers with coaching or administration experience, to support school leaders in their own development and in school improvement (Aguilar, Goldwasser, & Tank-Crestetto, 2011). At schools supported, the Academic Performance Index rose by an average of 74 points per year where the average growth in Oakland in 2009-10 was 26 points, and led to a significant reduction in turnover of effective teachers and a reduction in principal turnover.

Coaching for school leaders is vital, not only to develop individual leadership capacity, but equally as systems leaders. Effective educational leaders create environments which foster capacity development and reinforce and sustain ongoing learning. School leadership has an important influence on the likelihood that teachers will change classroom practices, and leaders who work with teachers can significantly influence their instructional practices, which in turn increases student learning (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010).

3.3. *Coaching for students*

Coaching has been applied successfully with students by coaches, teachers and student counselors, and also by students coaching students showing promising results.

The Sandwell project in the UK (Passmore & Brown, 2009) used a behavioral goal-focused model over 3 years with 18 schools with over 500 students (15 & 16 year olds). Academic coaches were recruited from a pool of newly qualified graduates interested in teaching but with no teaching qualification and were trained in coaching skills, problem solving, learning and group behavior. Outcomes were increased hope and enhanced examination performance for participating students. In addition, Sandwell’s performance improved above local and national trends. In Australia, solution-focused cognitive behavioral life-coaching for senior high-school students (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; Green et al., 2007) was delivered by school counselors in the first instance, and by teachers trained in coaching techniques in the second. The coaching enabled the development of students’ coping skills and resilience, increased well-being, cognitive hardiness and hope, decreased levels of depression, and the development of study skills and personal learning goals which contributed to enhanced performance.

Life coaching by student peers has also been shown to have the potential to enhance skills and personal development of students, and to help them manage stress. Students in secondary school and at university are under considerable stress (Green et al., 2007; Roussis & Wells, 2008). Coaching to help manage stress is important as it can impact academic performance. Peer coaching third year undergraduate psychology students (Short et al., 2010) was shown to be a moderately helpful in managing stressful times and is a practical and low-cost method. Evidence has also shown that there are benefits for the peer coach as well as the coachee in terms of enhanced socio-emotional skills and improved interpersonal skills (Ladyshevsky, 2006; Laske, 2006; Spaten & Hansen, 2009). Attempts have also been made to develop peer coaching skills in primary school children (Briggs & van Nieuwerburgh, 2010), and are promising avenues for further research.

Positive psychology has a valuable contribution to make in educational settings (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The focus is on identifying and nurturing what students value and are good at, helping them find ways to optimize their strengths, and helping them find niches where they can live out their strengths, and to provide them with life-skills that will enable them to succeed throughout life. Evidence-based coaching has been used as a methodology to apply positive psychology research, and has been shown to enhance wellbeing, facilitate goal attainment and foster purposeful positive change. Evidence-based strengths coaching has been used with male primary school students using The Youth Values in Action survey (for character strengths) yielding increases in

self-reported levels of engagement and hope (Madden et al., 2011). Wider large scale positive psychology interventions such as the Geelong Grammar School Project (GCS) in Australia and the Pennsylvania Resilience Program (PRP) in the USA are examples of how the use of a coaching methodology can bring about enhanced learning and well-being throughout an educational system (Seligman et al., 2009).

4. Conclusion: Systems of collective and collaborative learning

Fullan and Knight (2011) posit that school improvement will fail if coaching remains on an individual level. They call for coaches to be system leaders and change agents. One-to-one coaching interventions for educational leaders, teaching staff and students can begin to instill coaching cultures in educational settings as from a systemic perspective; change in one part of the system creates change in another (Srivastra & Cooperrider, 1990). A culture for learning occurs when the elements that make one-to-one coaching effective are transferred into the practices of the educational institution.

Generating learning cultures involves building collective understanding and motivation. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has been shown as a useful methodology in this respect as it encourages participants to focus on what is working and where a system's strengths are in order to build upon and grow these (Lewis et al., 2008; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). The AI methodology has the additional advantage that it can bring diverse groups of actors (students, leaders, teachers, parents, local authorities, social support actors) together to share ideas and create collective learning and direction.

A recent report (Mourshed, Chinezi, & Barber, 2010, cited in Fullan & Knight, 2011) which studied school systems that had gone from great to excellent found that these had focused primarily on professional learning (78%). It makes sense then to focus on professional learning of all actors in the educational system and the authors conclude that once teacher capacity reaches a certain level, collaborative peer learning becomes the most powerful source of continuing learning and innovation. School leaders and coaches have an important role to play in creating these learning cultures and linking them to the wider system.

Positive psychology with its focus on educating the whole child and building competencies for life (e.g. building hope and optimism, the capacity for self-direction and self-determination, risk-taking and future-mindedness, interpersonal skills, insight and perseverance, civic responsibility and work ethic), in addition to academic subjects may not yet be the current educational model in many schools, and further research will be needed.

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