

SCEL Fellowship Programme

Area of Enquiry

A systems level approach to enhancing leadership through coaching and mentoring

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Introduction

It is documented on the General Teaching Council of Scotland's website (GTSC 2016) that 'a coaching and/ or mentoring approach has become the cornerstone of a range of approaches to teaching and learning and to the way our education establishments are led and managed'. It is my contention that although progress in this area has been made within Scottish Educational Establishments, some caution must be taken to ensure that this statement does not become reified in practice. While studying for an Msc. in Educational Leadership I came to question the extent to which leaders within Scottish schools are employing coaching and mentoring strategies and how this may or may not impeding leadership development at all levels within the systems.

The intention of this small-scale investigation is to explore what is required at a systems level to strengthen and develop coaching and mentoring as an embedded skill set for leadership within all levels of Scottish Education.

Qualities of strong systems leadership and effective coaches and mentors

Pask and Joy (2007) contend that mentoring-coaching is a very powerful way of leading. They suggest that 'mentoring-coaching is a critical part of systems thinking and a very robust tool for professionals who are systems leaders' (pg. 232). Pask and Joy clarify that there very different ways of both managing and leading and that coaching offers profound ways of making respectful, as distinct from instrumental, approaches to leadership and management highly effective. They argue that leaders need to structure their leadership interventions in a coaching and mentoring way in order that they continue to build capacity in their organisation. Blase (2000) also suggests that effective instructional leadership integrates 'collaboration, peer coaching, inquiry, collegial study groups and reflective discussion into a holistic approach to promote professional dialog among educators' (pg. 137). It is my belief that by looking beyond individual organisations and establishments, this same robust tool of coaching and mentoring should be better utilised to enhance systems level developments.

Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) identifies the natural synergy between educational leadership and effective coaching. Van Nieuwerburgh lists some of the key skills and abilities of coaches as 'showing empathy, accurate listening, relating well to others, being able to put things into perspective, focusing on positives, remaining objective and fair, maintaining an open minded non-judgemental stance, being able to challenge others to achieve more to their potential and being able to give appropriate feedback to support development' (pg. 28).

I would agree with Van Nieuwerburgh's contention that these skills and attitudes are equally necessary for educational leaders as they are for coaches however would contend that for some school leaders in Scotland, there may be a lack of appreciation of how closely they are linked and indeed important. Dimmock and Yong Tang (2016) explain that there is a need to update the concept of (instructional) leadership to include practices within, between and beyond school change and describe 'a spectrum of roles exists for system leaders ranging in sphere and extent of influence' from mentoring other principals, leading partnerships, national leadership roles and above all, focusing on raising the quality of leadership to improve all aspects of the system.

Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) also argues that there is, now more than ever, a pressing need for educational leaders to work together to develop coaching resources across the system. He asserts that there is a role for leaders within the system to support the growth and development of future leadership. Daniel Goleman (2000) also identifies coaching as one of the six leadership styles of an effective leader and that through a coaching leadership approach, individuals are well supported, their aspirations identified and able to fulfil more of their potential. Torrance and Hume (2015) suggest that educational leadership represents a social practice, focused on the education system, concerned with education and integral to learning processes and outcomes.

Duncan and Stock (2010) recognise that finding time for 'mentoring and coaching is always a prime consideration for principals and districts, and in this harsh economic climate, cost is the bottom line' (pg. 307). Duncan and Stock highlight that mentoring and coaching programs need not be overly costly and suggest that rather than setting up formal mentoring programs, which can be time consuming and expensive districts can promote principal collaboration and collegiality to form informal support networks. These networks require creating a climate of trust and a culture that focuses on resource sharing rather than interschool competition. Furthermore, mentoring and coaching initiatives complement each other in developing confident and skilled professionals.

Policy Context

Coaching in education is an approach that has been growing over recent years, particularly since the early 2000s. Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) outlines that within England the emergence of coaching was supported by key documents such as the Key Stage 3 National Strategy Booklet published in 2003 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). It focused on lesson observation and professional learning as its aim. As the emphasis on coaching and mentoring expanded the *National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching* was developed and a further endorsement was made by the National College for School Leadership (NCL). The NCL continues to support the use of coaching in schools within England through its programmes for leaders.

As early as 2006, the Scottish Government provided funds for local authorities to build coaching and mentoring capacity in schools supposedly supported by a project framework to share ideas and create connections. Having discussed the background to the policy context and its delivery with colleagues leading the implementation of this strategy I would suggest that there was little guidance as to how these programmes were to be implemented or developed. This claim was supported through one to one interviews with key personnel responsible for implementation during this time. Each local authority adopted different approaches which included developing coaching and mentoring skills at middle leadership level in one local authority to embedding it within employee review and development schemes in another. Within another local authority, specialist coaching and mentoring consultants were retained until funding ceased. And in another authority the funding was used to develop a model of 'training the trainers' to disseminate coaching and mentoring techniques to enhance professional review and development programmes.

Graeme Finnie, Project Consultant to the SEED coaching and mentoring projects initiative evaluated the implementation of the strategy and in his commentary (Finnie 2007) contends that there was, even as early as 2007, 'further to go in determining the impact that coaching and mentoring have on professional practice and its consequent effects on learning and teaching' (pg. 1). Finnie concludes that it would take time, further resources, a continued focus on developing practice and the creation of 'stronger connections to key leadership, learning and teaching priorities to realise the full potential of the work' (pg. 1).

Building upon Finnie's recommendations the emergence of coaching and mentoring as a national Scottish strategy embedded in policy can be identified with the publication of the Donaldson review published in 2011. In the review, Graham Donaldson clearly outlines the importance of strong mentoring approaches at all stages of professional development. Out of the 50 recommendations proposed within the review, seven outline the importance of mentoring including within induction schemes and professional development. Donaldson (2011) contends however that 'approaches to the selection, training and monitoring of mentors vary widely and some lack necessary rigour and commitment' (pg. 94). It is my

contention that these inconsistencies and lack of rigour remain problematic within Scottish Education.

Interestingly, the Donaldson report does not make reference to coaching when discussing the impact of mentoring. However, prompted by the review, during the redevelopment of the Professional Standards by the GTCS in 2012, both the concepts of coaching and mentoring were established as key strategies and approaches that were no longer recommendations but now seen as ‘the cornerstone of a range of approaches to teaching and learning and to the way our education establishments are led and managed’ (GTCS 2016).

Furthermore, building upon the recommendations from the Donaldson report of (2011), the publication of Professor McCormac’s work *Advancing professionalism: The Report of the Review of Teacher Employment in Scotland* endorsed the GTCS plans to develop a system of re-accreditation, or professional update for all teachers within Scotland. The first phase of the pilot system began in August 2012 with teachers from three local authorities and in 2013 the GTCS conducted a review of the first phase. In an internal GTCS review, Robertson and Morris (2013) conclude that 85% of managers believed that they used coaching and mentoring approaches to some or a large extent within review meetings where in contrast only 45% of teachers believed this to be the case (pg. 10). Robertson and Morris also highlight a number of concerns relating to the capacity of individuals’ skills and knowledge to use coaching and mentoring approaches and the dominant concern related to the training and professional development of reviewers. A clear message from the report is the importance of ensuring ongoing and high quality professional learning for all reviewers.

Policy Enactment in Practice

In the autumn of 2016, I undertook a small-scale investigation to explore what might be required at a systems level to strengthen and develop coaching and mentoring as an embedded skills set for leadership within all levels of Scottish Education. Data collection included quantitative and qualitative surveys using scaling and open-ended questions and interviews with colleagues and local authority and National Development Officers.

Forty Head Teachers took part in this coaching and mentoring evaluation exercise within my local authority. Participants discussed their experiences of coaching and mentoring in small groups and then were asked to complete a simple survey.

Of the thirty-five Head Teachers and Depute Head Teachers who took part in the survey, all but two highlighted the positive impact that coaching had on their practice. Answers varied between the roles of being a coach and/or coachee but in general, the majority of the participants emphasised the positive impact that coaching had on the culture of learning within their establishments and the way in which it has transformed leadership styles. Participants identified the effective use of coaching strategies within employee review and

development sessions and the positive effect and development on solution focused planning.

Out of the 34 respondents who rated themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being highly effective) as a coach, the average rating was 5.6 with the median calculated at 6. The lowest score was 2 and the highest at 8. In terms of the respondents' current use of coaching strategies, the average rating on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being all the time), was calculated at 5.0.

In terms of perceptions of coaching, respondents were in the majority very positive. Coaching was identified as a powerful tool through which to empower people, develop their confidence and build leadership while ultimately improving teaching and learning. There was a recognition of the time commitments and constraints however it was recognised that coaching ultimately was a way through which to unwrap potential.

In terms of training and continued professional development opportunities, more than eighty percent of all respondents identified some level of study in the area of coaching and/or mentoring. Twenty percent of the respondents highlighted study at a post graduate or master's level. Eight percent had indicated they had participated in a six-day course run by the Local Authority and more than fifty-four percent answered that they had attended courses of one or two days duration focusing on coaching and mentoring. Only one respondent said that they had not had any further opportunities to explore coaching and mentoring.

However, despite very positive qualitative responses to questions focusing on the impact and perceptions of coaching and mentoring, the respondents within the survey did not rate themselves as optimistically in terms of their own abilities as a coach or their current use of coaching within their establishments.

Analysing the data from the small-scale investigation, I would suggest that although leaders within one local authority are able to clearly identify the positive impact that coaching and mentoring can have on practice and leadership of schools, they lack the training, time and self-confidence to believe they are able to enable colleagues to develop through a coaching approach. Consequently, it could be assumed that this impedes leadership development at a systems level.

Agreeing with Van Nieuwerburgh, I would also suggest that now as this time, there is a need for educational leaders to work together in terms of developing coaching resources, supporting their own growth and development but importantly also to support further systems level improvements. Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) suggest that it is during this time of global turbulence and volatility that the importance of further developing a profession that is both collaborative and activist must be reasserted. By working together to develop the leadership of a qualified and committed teaching profession we must 'speak to who we are and what we do together' (pg. 24). Accordingly, I would suggest there is a need for leaders

to use their enhanced coaching skills to work collaboratively together to improve the system through leadership development as Torrance and Hume also agree (2015), describing leadership as a social practice and through further collaborative coaching networks, skills of individuals and systems can be improved.

Considerations

Through this enquiry, I have observed and noted three emerging issues based on the small-scale investigation within one local authority, interviews with officers at a local and national level and substantial reading in the area of coaching and mentoring set within an international and Scottish context.

Firstly, the GTCS (2016) states that 'as a result of investment in this area (coaching), there is now considerable capacity in Scottish schools, Universities and Further Education settings in terms of the numbers of teachers with training in the relevant skills'. The GTCS website (2016) also states that 'it is important that those who are required to undertake a line management or reviewer role as part of the Professional Update process have had the opportunity to engage in in depth, substantial high quality professional learning in order to develop their coaching skills'. Although data from this study would confirm that more than 80% of respondents have participated in training in the area of coaching and mentoring, they did not assess themselves as having a high level of skills in this area. There is a need to support educational leaders to be able to recognise their coaching and mentoring skills and link them to their leadership competences. As explained by Daresh (2004), if mentoring is not respected as a legitimate approach to learning, it will not be successful and effective' (pg. 511). Pask and Joy (2007) would argue by doing so 'leaders who use the key skills and subskills on a day to day basis have a more sustainable and profound impact' in organisations that have members who are familiar with the principles and practices of mentoring and coaching' (pg. 240).

Secondly, as explained by Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) 'coaching can support educational leaders to continue perform effectively and with commitment it is always a useful tool for bringing out the best in educational staff and students, it can also leverage organisational change within schools, colleges and systemic change across the wider educational arena' (pg. 43). Pask and Joy (2007) suggest that leaders who structure their interventions in a coaching and mentoring system build capacity in their own organisation and 'although it can take time it has the greatest and longest-term impact of all leadership behaviours of an organisation' (pg. 242). The data from the small-scale survey would support this claim as out of the list of potential influences of coaching identified, 69% can be directly related to organisational change as identified by the respondents.

Finally, there are clear links between the key skills of a coach and an effective leader. Sheppard/ Moscow (2007) state that a positive coaching 'climate requires you (the coach) to believe in the client's potential, accept mistakes as long as the client is learning, be open to feedback, regard this as an opportunity to learn yourself, acknowledge the importance of feelings as well as facts in the workplace and to give support and encouragement'. The data from the small-scale survey would support this claim as the respondents identified 51% of their perceptions of the impact of coaching being related leadership skills. Hartle and Thomas (2003) suggest that good leaders can be identified as though who seek opportunities to learn, act with integrity, bring out the best in people and seek and uses feedback amongst other attributes. Barker, as referenced in Hartle and Thomas (2003) sets out six attributes of school leaders: astuteness, aura, empathy, reflectivity, drive and realistic self-belief.

Through this small-scale investigation within one local authority in Scotland, data would appear to support Robertson and Morris' findings. The data suggests that although leaders within one local authority are able to clearly identify the positive impact that coaching and mentoring can have on practice and leadership of schools, they lack the training, time and self-confidence to believe that they are themselves are able to enable colleagues to develop through a coaching approach. Consequently, it could be assumed that this impedes leadership development at a systems level.

Throughout my career and most recently during my participation in the SCEL Fellowship programme, I am able to identify the positive impact that coaching and mentoring has had on my own practice and indeed my leadership at a systems level. With the support of a personal coach, I have not only furthered enhanced my leadership skills in terms of reflectivity, drive, self-efficacy but I have also sought further opportunities to learn. I would suggest that through a more enhanced understanding of the policy context behind the strategy and a further development of my own coaching and mentoring skills I have also worked to enhance leadership skills of others at a systems level.

Recommendations/Next steps

This enquiry and its outcome is not one that has produced a step by step guide for implementing changes to coaching and mentoring approaches at a systems level. The complexity of the Scottish Education would preclude this. More importantly, it highlights the need for a further embedding the culture of coaching and mentoring within Scottish Education through extended discussion, collaboration, awareness raising and skills development.

It would be my recommendations that to do so, the following actions should be undertaken:

- Development of a professional learning activity which increases the knowledge and understanding of leaders of the policy context of coaching and mentoring, highlighting the clear link between the attributes of effective leadership and coaching and mentoring and how these can and should be used in all settings. This learning activity could be promoted through various networks and professional learning opportunities such as Into Headship, Local Authority, SCEL framework and could be both self-study or collaborative in nature. This professional learning was piloted in February 2017 as part of the Central Scotland Partnership Professional Learning programme. Feedback from participants was extremely positive and well received.
- Introduction of coaching trios or coaching networks built into or across existing SCEL regional networks to allow for more enhanced systems level collaboration and professional learning. This would involve using the professional activity described above to deepen understanding of the key concepts of coaching and mentoring as linked to leadership then support networks to establish coaching and mentoring relationships as appropriate.

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