

PEER COACHING AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS: A PROMISING OPTION?

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Abstract: For decades, proposals for the continuous development of teachers have influenced the approach to education globally. However, not all efforts for improvement by educational institutions show the desired effects. This article seeks to evidence how peer coaching can be an alternative tool for the professional development of teachers in service. The paper provides an initial overview of the origins of peer coaching, subsequently defining and describing this methodology, which is then followed by a compilation and examination of theoretical frameworks of existing research. Based on the evaluation of the outcomes of the research this article defends peer coaching as a promising alternative for professional teacher development.

Keywords: Teacher training; Continuous formation of teachers; Professional teacher development.

Resumo: Durante décadas, as propostas para uma formação continuada de professores têm influenciado a área de educação em todo o mundo, o que se reflecte no aumento das publicações nesta área. No entanto, nem todos os esforços feitos em busca de iniciativas adequadas foram coroadas com sucesso. Muitas tentativas realizadas em instituições educacionais não mostram os efeitos desejados, devido a uma série de razões. Nesse contexto, este artigo tem como objetivo examinar de que forma peer coaching pode ser um instrumento eficaz para o desenvolvimento profissional de professores em serviço. Este artigo, portanto, dá uma visão geral inicial sobre as origens do peer coaching e, posteriormente, define-o e o descreve, apresentando abordagens diferentes e examinando algumas pesquisas existentes e direcionadas. Com base na avaliação dos resultados dessa pesquisa, este artigo defende peer coaching como instrumento próspero para o desenvolvimento de professores no contexto da formação contínua.

Palavras-chave: Treinamento de professores; Formação continuada de professores; Desenvolvimento profissional de professores.

Justification

As early as the 1990s, the famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1991, p.58) described the profession of teaching as something that is naturally subject to constant improvement when he noted that “Nobody is born educator or marked to be an educator. We make educators, we form educators, permanently, in practice and in the reflexion of our practice.”¹

This seems to be even more logical and appropriate, facing the constant and fast changes in modern society and therefore also in modern education: good teachers constantly need to search for new ways to improve their teaching, in their daily practice. However, many teachers who read this statement will probably think "easier said than done", considering the challenges and obstacles they face in their workplace, which seem to leave little or no space for professional development.

As per Robbins (1991), most schools offer only limited possibilities for collegial work: the author sees the quantity and quality of the dialogue between colleagues impeded by time-consuming bureaucracy. She also considers the physical characteristics in schools, described by Glickman (1990, apud ROBBINS, 1991, p.10) as “one-room schoolhouses repeated every few yards down the corridor”, as barriers obstructing the communication between teachers.

¹from the original: Ninguém nasce educador ou marcado para ser educador. A gente se faz educador, a gente se forma como educador, permanentemente, na prática e na reflexão da prática (Esta tradução é de minha autoria)

In contrast, Flinders (1988) mentions the isolation of teachers in schools as the only possibility to cope with their time-consuming workload outside the classroom, like for example preparing lessons and correcting homework and tests of students, just to name a few. Robbins (1991, p.12) traces this isolation back to the teacher: “many entered the profession because of the autonomy the individual classroom offered. These teachers consciously chose the culture or context of isolation and now find themselves bound by norms and traditions that celebrate individual work and accomplishment.”

Moreover, Jennings (1998, apud GOTTESMAN, 2000, p.3), the superintendent of the Spartanburg 2° School District in South Carolina (U.S.), also considers the isolation of teachers as an obstacle for the professional development which could promote teacher growth. Comparing the profession of teaching with other professions like law and medicine, where professionals naturally work together in teams in order to solve problems, the author uses a pictorial comparison to illustrate what a teaching environment is frequently missing out on: “If teachers were flowers, they would die on the vine for lack of nourishment.”

Barth (2000, p.viii) sees these problems in the teachers, but also in the educational institutions:

There exists within our school cultures a debilitating taboo against practitioners making their work mutually visible. All too often, we don't talk about our practice with others who engage in the same work; we don't observe others who do what we do; we don't ask for help, even when we desperately need it; and we rarely take responsibility for and invest ourselves in the success of our peers. Rather, we occupy what one teacher called “our separate caves”. And for many good reasons. The world of schools makes us competitors for scarce resources and recognition. If I help you, you will do better and get more and I might do worse and get less.

The majority of the reasons considered by the authors to be responsible for the difficult situation of teachers seems to give little hope for a fast improvement. Creating

physical space for encounters, or even reducing bureaucracy, are points that can certainly be tackled even within a short time. However, the question is rather how other issues, like for example the isolation of teachers in the educational environment, be it self-wanted, can be addressed.

Facing these issues, it is absolutely necessary to think about measures that can help to overcome the existing situation, new ways and ideas need to be taken into consideration. In our context of continuous formation of language teachers, what seems to be an appropriate initiative is the so-called peer coaching, serving as a tool which promotes the professional development of teachers in service.

The history of peer coaching

Any attempt to describe the origins of peer coaching would be incomplete without taking account of the great influence of the North American researchers Beverly Showers and Bruce Joyce.

Both authors describe in their seminal work in 1996 that the concept of peer coaching initially emerged from the area of athletics as well as from researches about the transfer of training. Based on national movements in the United States that aimed at improving both academic quality and social equality, it was only in the 1950s that peer coaching evolved in the area of education.

However, initial efforts failed to deliver noteworthy results, as Showers and Joyce (1996, p.12) confirm. Their observations are based on examinations of studies which focussed

on staff development whose results showed a significantly low transfer rate of the content than had been conveyed before:

In the 1970s, evaluations of staff development that focused on teaching strategies and curriculum revealed that as few as 10 percent of the participants implemented what they had learned. Rates of transfer were low even for those who had volunteered for the training.²

Initially, it was the teachers that were held responsible for the failure of those initiatives, as it was assumed that the underlying cause was a lack of motivation, missing effort and wrong attitude, according to the authors.

However, they confirm that the real reasons were, first of all, that there was a lack of knowledge about how teachers acquire certain teaching strategies. On the other hand, there was also little known about how schools could successfully disseminate innovations. Moreover, schools did not actively support the training efforts conducted by teachers in workshops and summer courses. Instead, it was erroneously assumed that, after acquiring new skills, teachers would simply be able to return to their schools and apply the recently acquired knowledge without any problems.

Based on their observations, the question why so many teachers experienced serious problems when trying to apply the things that they had learned, Showers and Joyce started to investigate what exactly caused the problems in the transfer of knowledge: they organized regular seminars with teachers and soon discovered that these so-called coaching sessions which focussed on the analysis of teaching and also the students responses, enabled the

teachers to practice and implement the contents that they had learned beforehand, with astonishing effects:

The results were consistent: Implementation rose dramatically, whether experts or participants conducted the sessions. Thus we recommended that teachers who were studying teaching and curriculum form small peer coaching groups that would share the learning process. In this way, staff development might directly affect student learning (SHOWERS e JOYCE, 1996, p.12).

Whereas the authors conducted their early researches with small groups or individual teachers only, they soon started to include whole faculties into their studies. By involving the teachers, collaborating with them in regards to the definition of students needs by selecting suitable measures to design appropriate training and by finally analysing the impact of these initiatives, they perceived that it is essential to involve the social organizations of a school to allow significant results.

Definition of peer coaching

Since its evolution, peer coaching has assumed different names, based on the research of various authors. Robbins (1991) states that, although widely known under the term peer coaching, these kind of activities have taken on other names along time, like “peer support”, “consulting colleagues”, “peer sharing” and “peer care”. According to the author, this is also due to the fact that, for many people, the word “coaching” has a negative association in the sense that it implies a different status between people in a collaborative relationship.

However, it is precisely this equal status that constitutes the most important aspect of peer coaching, as described by Sizer (1985, apud ROBBINS, 1991, p.2): "the reality is that a teacher has the same "rank" in his or her last year of teaching as the first."

For Gottesman (2000), peer coaching also implies that two people on the same level coach each other. However, the fact that both peers in this coaching relationship might have different skills in certain areas does not obstruct the coaching process, on the contrary: the knowledge and strengths of one peer might eliminate the weakness of the other, consequently balancing each other during the cooperation.

For Barth (2000, p.viv) it is also the aspect of control that each teacher holds, which characterizes each peer coaching process:

Peer Coaching is nonevaluative, voluntary, and controlled largely by the learner. The person who is coached determines whether, when, and for how long, and for what purpose, the coaching will occur. Control and ownership, so foreign to conventional supervision, unlock abundant professionalism, support and learning for the coach and the coached alike.

Robbins (1991) distinguishes between two main approaches to peer coaching: the first one is aimed at helping teachers to implement certain methods or strategies that they had learned in preceding workshops or training units. However, the application of this approach to peer coaching might become routine, turning it into a practice that lacks reflection (HARGREAVES, 1989).

The second approach, as per Robbins (1991), can take on various forms, which all have in common that, during the coaching process, colleagues of the same institution work together in order to tackle teacher-specific problems: solving issues with regards to the design of curriculum, instruction or finding solutions regarding problems with individual students.

Therefore, this approach aims at improving certain teaching practices and increases teacher reflection.

Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, and Bulhuis (2009) in turn describe “reciprocal peer coaching” as activities that can be undertaken by pairs of teachers in their workplace, focussing on assisting each other with regards to issues in their teaching. The word “reciprocal”, in this context, means that both teachers rotate acting in the role of coach and the colleague being coached. By applying this kind of cooperation, they are able to learn from each other and to support each other.

However, considering the various facets that peer coaching can take on, Robbins (1991, p.1) offers a short definition, which comprises the most important aspects, in simple words:

Peer Coaching is a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace.

Peer coaching activities

As per Robbins (1991) there is an almost limitless variety of peer coaching activities: one of them is classroom observation, which is generally divided into a pre-conference, the actual observation, and a post-conference. The inviting teacher sets the parameter for the observation of a lesson, such as the date and time, the focus of the observation, the form of data collection and the guidelines for the peer’s behavior during the observation. Other possibilities include the co-planning of lessons or curriculum development, the discussion

about how to solve specific problems in the classroom, and the analysis of videotapes or study groups.

Caro and Robbins (1991) in turn suggest the so-called “talk walking”: two teachers engage in collegial dialogue that can, for example after a workshop, focus on questions with regards to curriculum or also instruction, in order for the teachers to reflect on what they have just learned. This activity can also be applied at any other time, in the way that two teachers simply arrange to meet for a walk and hereby discuss and reflect on certain teaching contents, like for example student behaviour or lesson planning. As per the authors, this activity promotes not only the teachers willingness to experiment and develops mutual learning, it also encourages trust between colleagues.

Another activity that is described by Shulman (1991) consists of telling stories, which could be done in small groups of colleagues. Teachers tell about certain situations from their practical experience, for instance how they managed to teach a specific content. The advantage is that, instead of giving direct advice which is often perceived negatively by the person who receives it, story telling offers teachers a non-threatening way to share pedagogical knowledge and to expand their teaching repertoire.

Vidmar (2006, p.141) describes another activity which is part of the so-called “reflective peer coaching”: “reflective peer coaching aims at fostering self-assessment and self-management by providing repeated opportunities to build upon an instructor’s pedagogy as related to personal goals and objectives.” According to the author, the focus lies on the conversation between the two peers, in which one would take on the role of an instructor in order to listen carefully to the other peer, without correcting him, and offer suggestions. The aim is a trustful, non-threatening working relationship, based on the trust that evolves during the process.

Considering the variety of possibilities on which peer coaching can be built, it might seem difficult to choose the appropriate activities, for a specific context. For young professionals without any previous coaching experience it might be adequate to start with story telling or talk walking, as these activities have a non-threatening character and therefore do not force the novices to expose themselves in front of other colleagues. However, more experienced teachers or those who feel more confident might apply more complex activities like classroom observation, videotape analysis or study groups, where they can actively reflect on their teaching practice and develop new ideas or strategies, together with their colleagues.

In any case, which activity is being applied needs to take into consideration the needs of the individual person, as the focus is always on the teacher being a learner, as Fullan, Bennett and Rolheiser-Bennett (1990) affirm.

Benefits of peer coaching

Traditional forms of supervision and orientation for foreign language teachers are often limited to classroom observation, or the completion of prefabricated forms that merely focus on aspects that had been defined previously. This consequently leaves no space for a critical analysis of the collected data and impedes a critical diagnosis which, in turn, makes it impossible to take appropriate action (ALMEIDA FILHO, 2009).

Gottesman (2000) is of the same opinion, pointing out that in many cases, traditional forms of supervision only provide short-term effects. In contrast, peer coaching offers a way to foster the professional development of teachers, and simultaneously reduce their isolation

in schools. Moreover, the application of peer coaching activities has the potential to create certain reflective and analytical capabilities.

Some of the benefits for teachers that have been reported by researchers involved in peer coaching are, as per Becker (2011): an increased ability to analyse their own classes, enhanced teacher performance, a bigger repertoire of strategies and resources for instruction, stronger professional ties with colleagues and a positive school climate, an improved learning progress and consequently students achieving better results.

Zwart, Wubbels, Bolhuis and Bergen (2008) also conducted studies using peer coaching: they created a learning environment that allowed teachers to work together in order to foster each other's professional development, dealing with problems they were already facing in their daily life as teachers. This environment, as per the authors, created opportunities for critical reflection on theories and research of others.

As per the same authors (2009), the studies revealed that it is intrinsic motivation that enables the learning process of teachers in professional development programs. Teachers need to experience a certain pressure to try out new instructional methods, they also need to have the possibility to exchange their experiences in a trustworthy and safe environment. According to the authors (2007) it is the collaboration, which can consist of observation, reflection, the exchange of experiences or mutual problem solving that enables teachers to apply new things they had learned before.

Hornberger (2002) conducted a follow up study of online instruction that integrated a peer coaching seminar course. The study revealed that almost 50% of the participating teachers changed the way they structured and delivered their lessons. As per the author, the discussions with their peers fostered the reflection of the teachers on their strong and weak points, they were also able, through self-evaluation, to recognize which of their teaching skills

they needed to improve. Also, 65% of the teachers who had participated in this study continued to use certain components of the project, even up to two years after completing the course.

Gottesman (2000, p.4) again cites Jennings (1998) who evaluates peer coaching with the following words:

A model such as Peer Coaching treats teachers like professionals and recognizes their needs. This model promises teachers the opportunity to explore other teaching techniques and learning opportunities in a safe environment. An environment that encourages sharing as a dialogue rich in context in order to improve teacher performance.

Slater and Simmons (2001) discovered in their study of peer coaching that, very often, teachers experience negative feedback from students and also from the administrators of their schools. The reasons that obstruct a possible process of change for teachers are their own lack of vision and doubts as to their abilities to collaborate with other teachers. However, the study also revealed that this negative attitude can be changed by the application of peer coaching which not only offers help and companionship for the participants, it also fosters student learning, due to the improvement of teacher instruction which in turn leaves more time to actually teach the students.

For Vidmar (2006), peer coaching naturally involves reflection which he considers essential in regards to assessment, decision making and also to a deeper understanding of the teaching practice. For the author (2006, p.138), “a reflective instructor constantly observes, gathers information on what is happening and how to address it”. Reflection also stimulates self-discovery which results in a more trusting and collaborative work environment. The author also states that teachers who take part in peer coaching activities are more conscious of

their actions, they can share negative and positive experiences, and they develop a higher awareness of how they act in the classroom.

Conclusion

Evaluating the results of the existing research in this article, I conclude that peer coaching undoubtedly can serve as an appropriate tool for the continuous development of teachers. All studies described by the researchers, without exception, show positive results, both at the individual level and at an institutional level.

However, considering the factors which possibly impede the process of continuous development, described at the beginning of this article, it has to be noted that the responsibility to overcome these issues is with both the educational institution as well as the individual teacher.

First of all, a basic pre-requisite is a physical space on school premises, so teachers have the possibility to regularly get together in order to reflect on certain topics, exchange experiences, discuss specific issues, or to simply have a chat. Schools also need to create space in the way that they provide (paid) time and flexibility for teachers to meet and initiate peer coaching activities. An assistant teacher, for example, could substitute regular teachers by the hour and facilitate classroom observation. Also, bureaucratic processes ideally should be kept to a minimum, reducing the workload that many teachers face.

Moreover, schools need to create a working environment that encourages teachers to share experiences instead of holding back with their knowledge, offering incentives for those who take part in activities of teacher training.

But the responsibility is also with the teachers themselves who need to overcome their, in many cases, self-wanted isolation, actively asking for help when necessary, at the same time offering assistance to colleagues who might need it, thereby creating an ambiance which fosters mutual, constructive problem solving and support. By taking the lead and contributing their part, individual teachers can try to motivate other colleagues and possibly soon involve the whole faculty.

Peer coaching is not limited to certain countries, institutions or school departments. Everyone can take part, be it language teachers, math teachers or art teachers. The application of certain activities does not depend on any official political decisions like those from ministries of education, for example. All it needs are two or more teachers willing to improve their professional life and a workplace that offers the necessary support. Also, the financial expands for schools can be kept to a minimum, as there is no need to hire an external instructor.

I conclude that peer coaching has a considerable potential as an alternative form of continuous teacher training. Due to the great variety of activities that can be applied, this methodology does not necessarily need to be considered a self-contained procedure, it can also serve as a supplement for existing coaching efforts that have already been put in place in educational institutions.

The potential lies within the schools themselves and the accumulated years of experience of their own teachers, a huge resource which can definitely serve to effect significant changes. In fact, there is no more excuse for not giving it a try.

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