Supporting teacher development through coaching

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Abstract

Lucy Bolton is a teacher of Performing Arts and English as well as having a post of responsibility – Head of Year 9. In this article she describes how she supported colleagues' professional development through coaching. She reflects both on the impact of the coaching programme on student and teacher attitude and on the potential of teacher-led development work to support professional growth.

Over the past three years I have been a member of a Teacher Led Development Work group at my school and have undertaken a number of development projects. In 2008, I focused on a school wide concern: underachieving students in Science.

The beginnings of a plan

Inconsistency in the quality of teaching in Science was impacting on students' learning in my year group. To address this I took up the challenge set out by Brighouse and Woods who had asserted that 'it is the personal and professional growth of teachers that will have the most impact on pupil development' (1999:94). I offered to work alongside science teachers to try to improve the learning experience of Year 8 students. I had read some articles discussing coaching and decided to explore this strategy further. I was encouraged by one description of coaching as: 'a process that helps others to enhance their performance and set their own direction' (Thomas and Smith, 2004:12). The idea of teachers owning their development appealed to me because it seemed to have the potential to lead to sustainable self-development.

With a coaching programme in mind, I met with the Head of Science to learn more about the issues within the department. We agreed that I would lead a Science Department briefing to share my concerns about the learning of students in my year group and to explore ways forward with my science colleagues.

The response from the department as a whole was very positive but there were clear signs that some members of staff were more willing than others to participate in the development work. I asked them to share their views about departmental strengths and weaknesses and their own teaching and learning priorities. We did this in writing as individuals by using a simple feedback sheet. Colleagues felt that the management of the department was a real strength with the main weaknesses being lesson planning, behaviour management and, most importantly, a lack of consistent standards of teaching. One member of the group expressed particular enthusiasm about working with me on developing her own skills. She had also approached me separately to discuss the behaviour of her Year 8 Science class. I will call this teacher Sarah. It seemed sensible to begin with just one enthusiastic volunteer and expand from there.

Sarah and I met to discuss how we could work collaboratively to raise standards of learning in her lessons. We chose to focus on a low ability Year 8 group, some of whom display challenging behaviour in science. As Sarah Bubb points out: 'teaching isn't easy and getting better at it isn't just a matter of experience' (Bubb, 2005:1). I knew I needed to plan an intervention which would help Sarah to develop her skills. We discussed my proposal that coaching might be the best way to achieve our aims. For me self-reflection lies at the heart of coaching and that the ability to critically review processes and practices lies at the heart of school development (Stenhouse, 1975). The potential for whole-school impact was important to me. I wanted this to be a project which not only impacted on one colleague and one group of children but which had the potential for wider development in the school.

Self-esteem and the self-fulfilling prophesy

I began to consider not only the impact that my interventions may have on the learning of my students but also the impact on Sarah herself. Sarah suffered from low self-esteem with regard to her abilities with this group of students. Her opinion affected her expectations both of her own teaching and student outcomes, which in turn became a self-fulfilling prophesy (Brighouse and Woods, 1999).

I knew I had to help Sarah to improve the effectiveness of her teaching whilst ensuring that she felt confident and empowered. I wanted her to focus on students' learning rather than her teaching. I wanted her to consider students' needs and desires and to work with

them to solve their problems rather than accept their underachievement. The way teachers view their pupils as learners is a crucial part of the teaching process and these views could have a significant impact on student behaviour (Moon and Mayes, 1999). I discussed this with Sarah who expressed a very positive attitude towards her Year 8 Science class. She firmly believed that they were capable of achieving; her main concern was their poor behaviour which meant they were not achieving their potential. I discussed with her Moon and Mayes' view that 'all children should have an equal opportunity of acquiring intelligence, and of developing their talents and abilities to the full' (1999:36). She was very interested in this and we went on to establish our joint priorities to impact on the students' behaviour through the development of high quality teaching and learning.

Devising the coaching programme

Having agreed the principle underpinning my work with Sarah I set about developing the actual shape of the support programme. Sarah's main concern was the poor behaviour of the students. She felt very nervous about teaching the class and didn't feel that she was in control of the lessons. I agreed to observe a lesson to see how I could help her. The first observation unearthed some fundamental problems; the poor behaviour I had witnessed seemed to be a result of boredom rather than the students being naturally unruly. There was a distinct lack of learning taking place due to non-productive activities. The students did not know what they were supposed to be learning as there were no aims or learning objectives shared with the class.

I now had to decide how to feed back to Sarah on what I had seen. Montgomery (2002) believes feedback should be immediate whereas Bubb (2005) recommends allowing time for reflection, looking carefully at what your focus will be. I decided that the feedback should be given on the same day as the observation but at the end of the school day. This allowed both Sarah and myself to reflect. It also allowed me to structure my feedback carefully, ensuring that I focused on Sarah's achievements. I had to consider the importance of focusing on the positive, ensuring that the areas for improvement were manageable and included targets set by the teacher herself. This would hopefully allow Sarah to reflect positively on her own progress whilst also allowing her to see potential areas for change (Bubb, 2005).

This first observation was a very productive starting point both for Sarah's own self-evaluation and for my coaching role. I encouraged Sarah to enter into a dialogue with me by asking for her own opinion of the lesson (Bubb, 2005). We then focused on the use of learning objectives and how they determined the lessons' activities. We agreed that Sarah would try phrasing the learning objectives as questions which could then be used to structure her plenary. A further observation was scheduled for the same class two weeks later. When giving feedback I was careful to make visible for Sarah the progress she was making. This process enabled us to plot Sarah's progress, but more importantly to discuss the impact it was having on her students. I also fed back to the Head of Science who in turn encouraged and praised Sarah's achievements.

We continued with a programme of regular lesson observations. Each observation focused on teacher behaviour and related to targets we had previously set together (Weatherley, 2000). The particular focus for the second observation was the use of learning objectives to focus the students' learning and ensure progress was made by all. The pattern of observations ranged from one hour lessons which allowed me to look at the structure, pace and the learning taking place, to specific 10 minute focused observations looking at aspects such as starters and plenaries. We also worked on differentiation and lesson planning which would contribute to improving students' learning and lessen the need for behaviour management strategies. We tried to ensure that the targets we had set during observations were addressed in Sarah's lesson planning. We also met informally. These sessions were vital to the coaching process as they allowed Sarah to share her ideas, problems and successes with me. The openness of our programme was, I believe, one of its strengths, allowing me to support Sarah personally throughout the development process.

Working together to move forward

The coaching programme I developed reflected my belief in the efficacy of a shared process of development. My thinking resonated with that of Joyce and Showers (1995) who argued that the key elements to a successful coaching programme are joint planning and resource development, together with mutual observation and learning. In my case I felt that it was important that Sarah shared my understanding of the power of teacher-led development work in effecting change. As our collaborative work progressed, I began to read more about the way in which collaborative enquiry can impact

on practice. The idea that risk taking was essential to teacher development seemed particularly powerful (Harris, 2002). I was also interested in the links between my development work and the TDA (Training and Development Agency for Schools) framework of professional standards. All teachers are expected to 'have a commitment to collaboration and co-operative working' (TDA, 2007:15) in order to meet the core standards and are expected to 'share the development of effective practice' (TDA, 2007:21). Taking this idea further, it was clear that not only was my own development work corresponding with the core standards but also enabled Sarah to meet her own standards more effectively.

Key outcomes

One of the aims of my intervention was to begin to develop a culture of reflective practice in which colleagues engage in professional dialogue with one another (Street and Temperley, 2005). I was keen that this be a starting point for whole school improvement in this area. At the heart of the coaching programme was also a need for one teacher to find her own solutions to her problems, taking ownership of her own failures and successes and gaining the power to sustain change from this process (Leat, 2008). I wanted colleagues to be able to plot their own journey and feel the benefits of it both professionally and personally. It is very true that 'neither the coach nor the person being coached know what is possible' (Thomas and Smith, 2004:12). When we began the process neither Sarah or myself could have predicted the outcomes, nor could we have predicted the shift in Sarah's perception of what support she needed. The change in focus from maintaining control over her class to a focus on learning outcomes was immense and surprising. The link between behaviour and learning was certainly affirmed for both of us. It was at this point that I realised my role had also changed. I was 'cast in the role of a learner, not as someone evaluating the observed teacher' (TDA, 2008:3).

In order to formally evaluate the success of the coaching programme I firstly looked at the improvement in Sarah's teaching. Analysis of the lesson observation records indicated that there was clear improvement in the quality of teaching with lesson tasks being linked to a clear set of objectives. It was also clear that Sarah's expectations of students had increased. She was no longer expecting them to behave poorly and complete little work. Another indicator of improvement was the reduction in poor behaviour. Using Sir Frederic Osborn School's 'behaviour for learning' data it was clear

that there had been a reduction in students receiving warnings and a dramatic reduction in students being sent to 'isolation'. The numbers are now much more in line with the school wide figures.

Next I began to consider the impact of the coaching programme on Sarah's confidence and self-esteem. I interviewed both Sarah and her Head of Department using an informal approach where I was able to ask a range of questions, but could also engage in further discussion. I first asked Sarah for her thoughts on what had changed whilst we had been working together. She was very positive about the outcomes for students' learning.

> *Behaviour has dramatically improved; there is a much calmer environment. The entrance into the lesson which was once a major concern has improved greatly which allows the lesson to start quickly and more work to be completed. There has been an increase in mutual respect between myself and the students. The students' attitude to learning has improved and so has their work completion rate. There has been a major increase in students' active participation and contribution in lessons. I have also seen a major increase in the amount of homework completed and handed in on time; I would say I used to get about 10% of the class handing in homework whereas now I get about 50%.*
>
> (Extract from Sarah's interview)

I also wanted to gather information on the personal element as I had witnessed a dramatic change in Sarah's confidence and presence around the school. Initially, Sarah's lack of confidence and low self-esteem meant that her body language was very defensive and didn't put her students at ease. Sarah came to understand that her physical presence within the classroom impacted upon her students' learning' (Brighouse and Woods, 1999). She recognised this change in herself.

> *The main change is in my confidence both within my own classroom, with my lesson planning and around the school with the students. I have been able to see the major changes which is great. I really feel like I am in control and can now manage the groups' behaviour and their progress.*
>
> (Extract from Sarah's interview)

Sarah acknowledged the move from an initial focus on student behaviour to that on learning.

Through the lesson observation feedback I have made two major changes, I now use questions as lesson objectives which students can answer at the end of the lesson and I also have improved my plenary and have started to include mini plenaries to structure progress throughout the lesson.

(Extract from Sarah's interview)

A discussion with the Head of Science highlighted other areas of impact.

I have seen a major change in Sarah's overall attitude.. she is very willing to share her experiences, good or bad with others in the department. She is talking about teaching and learning and we rarely hear her mention behaviour. Another thing is that she has started going into the staffroom, sitting and chatting with other staff. She never used to.

(Extract from Interview with Head of Science)

The fact that Sarah's improved confidence in the classroom led to her feeling more confident around the school was an unexpected outcome for me. I wondered about the impact of these changes on the students. I looked at student attainment levels and also interviewed some members of the class.

Students had made significant progress in their learning in the period of the coaching programme. The four students I interviewed, two boys and two girls' gave me some further insights. Many of the students noticed a change in the way Sarah acts as a teacher.

Miss is much more smiley, she sends postcards home when we do something good. I really enjoy Science and I sometimes can tell my form tutor what I learnt because there is always a question on the board that we need to know the answer to by the end of the lesson.

(Student D)

They also noticed a change in the lesson content and in their own behaviour.

We have done loads more experiments and we get to complete them all. We don't do as many worksheets which is great because they are really boring.

(Student C)

I haven't been sent to isolation in Science since Christmas, that's really good for me.

(Student B)

The way forward

I have learned a great deal about the process of coaching and its effect on those involved. When I began the process I was very focused on the aim of increasing students' achievement, but I had not realised how intertwined teacher behaviours and student learning actually are.

When considering the way forward I returned to the idea of a learning culture. In order for teachers to move on in their personal development there needs to be a supportive school climate which embraces weaknesses and celebrates successes, however small. In addition there has to be a strong working relationship between coach and recipient, and a real understanding of what makes effective professional learning. It became evident to me that the best method of implementing change was through collaborative practice.

Through this development work I have not only been able to see how coaching can improve an individual teacher's practice but it has also become evident that the process of inquiry has also made a major impact on both Sarah and myself. Having been a founder member of the Sir Frederic Osborn School's TLDW group I have seen the idea of teacher-led development work grow and make significant contributions to school wide development. It is also interesting to note that Sarah opted to join the TLDW group to support her in pursuing her own development work. Both Sarah and I were cast into the role of learner and together we were able to plan, implement and evaluate a series of interventions which ultimately had an impact on us as practitioners and on our students. It has also had implications for the wider school.

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