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Peer coaching: A review of the literature

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Abstract

This paper explores the literature that examines peer coaching. It introduces the concept of peer coaching, identifies the key characteristics of peer coaching, and explores the history of the use of peer coaching in education and the benefits and limitations of peer coaching.

Key words

Peer coaching, higher education, tertiary, field-based initial teacher education

Introduction

There have been many studies that have investigated the concept of peer coaching (as enumerated/catalogued in Ackland, 1991; Lu, 2010). However, as each study provides its own characterisation of peer coaching, there appears to be no universal definition (Fletcher, 2007). Peer coaching is not a 'one size fits all' model and each situation consequently requires a different framework of the concept. This literature review was completed to enable the researcher to find such a definition for a project that investigated the benefits of a peer coaching relationship as a support system for tertiary students who were undertaking a field-based initial teacher education programme in early childhood education.

What is peer coaching?

Britton and Anderson (2010) suggest that the concept of peer coaching builds on the influential work of Goldhammer (1969) in clinical supervision. Clinical supervision was developed as a professional development technique between supervisors and classroom teachers. The supervisor would observe the teachers' classroom behaviour and provide detailed data of that observation (Munson, 1998). This has grown, Munson (1998) suggests, into peer coaching and peer observation.

The concept of peer coaching in education has been around for some time, stemming from research of teachers' practice undertaken in the 1980s by Bruce Joyce and Beverley Showers (Joyce & Showers, 1982; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Ackland



(1991) completed a review of the literature surrounding peer coaching in the early 1990s where he identified the two main forms of coaching—led by experts and reciprocal coaching (Ackland, 1991; Lu, 2010). These two forms of peer coaching are perhaps the most commonly used today. Donegan, Ostrosky and Fowler (2000) further discuss the differences between expert coaching and reciprocal coaching (as defined by Ackland, 1991). In expert peer coaching a more experienced person, for example a teacher, works with a less experienced person in a peer coaching partnership. The experienced person always acts as the coach. With reciprocal peer coaching, the peer coaching partners work alongside each other and share the coaching role to find ways to empower each other in their practice (Donegan et al., 2000; Lu, 2010). Since Ackland's (1991) review the use of peer coaching has become widespread in the fields of business, health and education. In each of these areas peer coaching has been defined in a variety of different ways; that is, designed to suit its intended purpose/environment (Fletcher, 2007; Griffiths & Campbell, 2009; Ives, 2008). From the literature reviewed for the purpose of this discussion there appears to be no consensus as to what a typical peer coaching model should look like, but there are some crucial key concepts that each model must share and these will be discussed later. Griffiths and Campbell (2009) suggest that because of the growth in the popularity of peer coaching and the lack of research in this field there is significant uncertainty about what peer coaching actually is, who it is for, where the concept came from, and what, in fact, it can actually achieve. However, several authors (for example, Jackson, 2004; Slater & Simmons, 2001; Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis, 2007, 2009) suggest that each model shares some fundamental principles. Many of these principles are captured by Jan Robertson (2005) in her definition of peer coaching:

... a special, sometimes reciprocal, relationship between (at least) two people who work together to set professional goals *and* achieve them. The term depicts a learning relationship, where the participants are open to new learning [and] engage together as professionals equally committed to facilitating each other's leadership learning development and wellbeing.... Dialogue is the essence of coaching and the concurrent improvement of practice. (p. 24)

Key characteristics of peer coaching

Jan Robertson's (2005) mention of dialogue or communication between the peer coach partners is an extremely important key characteristic of a good peer coaching model. As with any relationship, clear and open lines of communication are essential for a peer coaching partnership to operate. A relationship where conversations are non-evaluative must be developed between peer coaching partners (Ladyshevsky, 2006; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Showers and Joyce (1996) removed verbal feedback, which had initially been included (Joyce & Showers, 1982), from their peer coaching structure as they discovered that when the teachers in their research tried to give each other feedback the collaboration between the partnerships often collapsed. In her discussion of peer coaching versus peer observation Munson (1998) suggests that peer coaching requires teachers to make judgments about each other's practice which could cause interpersonal issues to arise; she argues that peer observation eliminates this aspect and that the relationship then becomes one of trust because the feedback being given to teachers involved in peer observation is purely observational data and is not judgmental.

Munson's (1998) assumptions contradict those of Showers and Joyce (1996), as their concept of peer coaching is not for teachers to make judgments about each other, as Munson suggests, but rather to encourage collaboration for improved classroom teaching. Therefore Munson's concept of peer observation is more comparable to peer coaching as it has been framed in the literature than the reader is led to believe. The non-evaluative nature of peer coaching is a distinctive feature of the model and along with other characteristics, such as trust and reflection, it is fundamental to the concept of peer coaching developed by Joyce and Showers (1982), and is, I suggest, common to all peer coaching relationships.

As noted, two other key components of peer coaching which must be identified and discussed are issues of trust and reflection. The importance of basing a peer coaching relationship on trust is clearly identified in the literature (Jackson, 2004; Ladyshevsky, 2006; J. Robertson, 2005; Slater & Simmons, 2001). As with a community of practice where trust develops as the members begin to understand each other better (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), so too will trust become stronger over time in a peer coaching partnership. Jan Robertson (2005) proposes that a feeling of trust should also be felt towards the facilitator of the peer coaching partnerships. Both she and Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that this trust will take time to develop, and it is therefore crucial that time is allowed in order to establish trust when initially beginning a peer coaching relationship. Although this is alluded to in the literature no clear understanding of how long this development of trust could take emerges.

A further critical characteristic of peer coaching is reflection. Jackson (2004) posits that peer coaching is intrinsically a reflective endeavour, and as such participants will need to be skilled in reflection (Loughran, 2002; O'Connor & Diggins, 2002). Reflective practice therefore needs to be evident in any peer coaching training that is provided. Donegan et al. (2000) suggest that the growth of reflective practice that comes through participation in a peer coaching relationship is paramount for early childhood education teachers, the sector in which they based their research. They fail to acknowledge that in fact reflection must certainly be an essential skill for any educator, regardless of the age or stage they teach. In her model of "coaching leadership", Jan Robertson (2005) says that by learning the skills of reflective interviewing, coaches are able to question their partners in ways that enable them to critically reflect on whatever issue they are discussing. Inherent to successful reflective conversations is the ability to be an active listener (J. Robertson, 2005; K. Robertson, 2005). Without this ability, peer coaches are unable to formulate the reflective questions needed to empower their partner to find solutions. As Jan Robertson (2005) suggests, this can be an incredibly hard skill to master. When involved in conversations participants are often eager to share their thoughts and experiences, which doesn't always allow the issue to be resolved in a reflective or satisfactory manner.

In summary, trust, reflection and good communication skills, which include being able to provide non-evaluative feedback, have all been identified as significant components required for successful peer coaching partnerships. It is essential that these components must be considered and nurtured if peer coaching partnerships are to be beneficial for those involved.

Establishing a peer coaching relationship

Just putting a peer coaching partnership together is not enough to ensure that a successful relationship develops. Factors such as issues of trust, time, knowledge and skills must be taken into consideration. As Zwart et al. (2009) note, both partners must acquire the necessary skills and attitudes to be both the coach and the coached. For this reason many studies investigating peer coaching include some form of workshop or training for the participants. In her review of literature on peer coaching in pre-service teacher education Lu (2010) found that most of the studies provided from two to nine hours of training prior to embarking on peer coaching. These training sessions involved learning the techniques, skills and attitudes required to be coached, be a coach and in some instances training on specific technology needed for the peer coaching programme (Lu, 2010). A gap in the literature exists here. Questions such as ‘How important is the training for peer coaches?’ and ‘What should be taught and who decides this?’ should be asked. Furthermore what is an acceptable duration of the training to ensure all necessary skills are taught, learnt and practised?

As previously acknowledged trust is an important factor for a successful peer coaching relationship and as noted participants in a peer coaching partnership must develop trust in each other and time needs to be given for this to be established (J. Robertson, 2005; Wenger et al., 2002). Jan Robertson goes on to suggest that in order for trust to be created and maintained issues of respect and confidentiality must be addressed; this is supported by Rice (2012), who required participants in her study to sign confidentiality agreements. In the first instance peer coaches need to be given time to begin to form trusting relationships, but again it is unclear how much time should be allowed for this. The development of trust could be achieved through the workshops or training programmes as described by Lu (2010) above, or through other forms of communication such as email, text, face to face and communication methods like Skype and such. Through initially developing trust, respect will then be built. It is important for the facilitator of a peer coaching arrangement to ensure that the participants are well aware of the importance of confidentiality because if privacy is breached then trust and respect dissipates (Rice, 2012).

As with any relationship peer coaching partnerships need to be fostered and a commitment to investing time must be made by both partners. Jan Robertson (2005) proposes that it is important at the beginning of the peer coaching relationship that both partners agree on regularity of contact and make a commitment to the process. This is echoed by Rice (2012) in her discussion of the importance of timing for feedback and discussion to take place. Contacting each other through text (SMS) messages or social networking sites could strengthen commitment in a peer coaching relationship and would indeed make the most of every opportunity for contact. However it must be noted that using social networking media comes with its own set of dangers, and so protocols can be established by those involved.

The next step in establishing a peer coaching relationship must be that of learning and practising the necessary skills, which may include, but are not limited to, things like active listening, reflective conversations and goal setting (O’Connor & Diggins, 2002; J. Robertson, 2005; K. Robertson, 2005). These can be initially taught by a facilitator at a workshop or training programme, as previously suggested, and will develop over time as the peer coaches practise them with each other. It appears to be important for the facilitator to maintain a presence after the initial training to further support these

developing skills (J. Robertson, 2005). How this presence is maintained, and how effective it is, is another area of limited research and therefore warrants further examination.

Benefits and limitations of a peer coaching partnership

As with any relationship or support model peer coaching has benefits and limitations. The literature clearly identifies possible benefits; however discussion of the possible limitations is less frequent.

Benefits

Previous studies have found many benefits of peer coaching. These include being able to give something back, providing encouragement and support, and learning from each other, which are well documented in the peer coaching literature as being consistent benefits of peer coaching (Anderson, Barksdale, & Hite, 2005; Donegan et al., 2000; Swafford, 1998). Further to these, Rice (2012) found in her study with a group of higher education faculty members that those who participated in peer coaching using “formative dialogue” (p. 69) seemed to favourably regard the experience. As Rice (2012) and others note, one of the most important benefits that should come from a peer coaching programme based in the education sector is increased success for the learner—regardless of what age group or category they fall into (Buzbee-Little, 2005; Ramsay, 1994; Showers & Joyce, 1996). By building strong peer coaching partnerships in education, teachers are empowered to find new and innovative ways to teach, which in turn benefits those they teach, as well as themselves, their colleagues and their institutions (Rice, 2012).

Participants in a peer coaching partnership are then better able find their own solutions to issues and problems, whether this is in their workplace or indeed in their personal life (Murryhy, 2009). Murryhy (2009), in working with three educational leaders in peer coaching partnerships, discovered that two of these leaders identified that peer coaching had helped them to communicate better, having a direct impact on their dialogue with their families.

A further benefit Rice (2012) noted is a fiscal one, particularly for the tertiary sector. A peer coaching partnership is a low-cost exercise. It can link to increased student success, thus implying more students continue and enrol. More students means more money for the institution. This is particularly important when tertiary institutions in New Zealand and elsewhere are funded on completions.

Limitations

One of the biggest problems faced by people engaged in a peer coaching partnership is lack of time (Donegan et al., 2000; J. Robertson, 2005). Because of the pressures of everyday life finding the time to meet can be a challenge, particularly when participants don't live close to each other or when meeting time is not included in their workload allocation.

Donegan et al. (2000) further identify that different philosophies held by the peer coaches may cause a problem in their relationship. As already noted, the skills of active listening and reflective practice are essential in maintaining good communication

between the partners and if used correctly will enable peer coaches to work together to see issues from each other's perspective. Having a facilitator available to help resolve issues could assist in a successful resolution of any problems (Rice, 2012; J. Robertson, 2005).

Another potential problem is that of real or perceived external factors impacting on the coach's abilities to form relationships and continue in their partnership (J. Robertson, 2005). Such factors may include family commitments, work responsibilities, Education Review Office visits,¹ community obligations and the like. As Jan Robertson (2005) suggests, when these problems arise this is when peer coaching can come "into its own" (p. 152). Effective coaches are better able to help their partners to find coping mechanisms to deal with such events.

Implementation of peer coaching in the education sector

As discussed earlier, the idea of peer coaching in education was suggested in the early 1980s by Showers and Joyce as a tool for onsite professional development for teachers (Joyce & Showers, 1982; Lu, 2010; O'Bree, 2008; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Joyce and Showers (1982; Showers & Joyce, 1996) began with the aim of finding out whether regular opportunities for groups of teachers to engage with each other would increase the rate of implementation of what they had learnt during professional development. They discovered that, through small groups of peers coaching each other, what the teachers were learning increased considerably.

Since then, there has been substantial growth in the use of a more defined peer coaching model in certain areas of the education sector (O'Bree, 2008). Teachers in some early childhood settings, primary and secondary classrooms use this model of collaborative support to enhance their practice and student learning outcomes (Buzbee-Little, 2005; Donegan et al., 2000; Gathercole & Ruston, 2009; Swafford, 1998) through to tertiary institutions where peer coaching (or a comparable model) is used with pre-service teachers and postgraduate students (Baron & Carr, 2008; Britton & Anderson, 2010; Jenkins & Veal, 2002; Ladyshewsky, 2006). There is significant documentation regarding the use of peer coaching in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors (particularly post-graduate); however there is less evidence of the practice of peer coaching in the early childhood education sector.

Peer coaching and classroom teaching

Many studies exploring peer coaching have discussed the benefits of the model for teachers in both primary and secondary classrooms (see Buzbee-Little, 2005; Fletcher, 2007; Gathercole & Ruston, 2009; Zwart et al., 2007, 2009). One of the main benefits of peer coaching, as such studies purport, is its effect on collaborative teacher learning and teaching (Buzbee-Little, 2005; Zwart et al., 2009). These collaborative models of teaching could link to enhancing student success as teachers work together to find innovative and interesting ways of promoting learning (Rice, 2012; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Swafford, 1998; Zwart et al., 2009).

A small study carried out by Zwart et al. (2009) of 28 Dutch secondary school teachers involved in peer coaching was motivated by educational reforms in the Netherlands. These researchers had a particular desire for students to develop the ability to become active in their own learning and to become lifelong learners. Zwart et al.

(2009) note that professional learning is enhanced when it becomes a shared goal or has a shared focus. In this instance, it relates to academic outcomes for students. This shared goal was achieved in their study by the teachers participating in peer coaching.

Donegan et al. (2000) discuss the possible use of peer coaching in early childhood education (ECE), in particular the special education field. They identify four reasons why peer coaching may be an advantageous tool for professional development in the early childhood education sector. They propose that when early childhood teachers become involved in a peer coaching partnership feelings of isolation can be mitigated. They suggest that the very nature of peer coaching, where peers work closely together, fits well with the collaborative nature of early childhood education. Donegan et al. (2000) also say that peer coaching could help early childhood teachers respond better to children, and this is particularly important in their field of research—special needs. Also, one of its strengths is that being a peer coach means that the coach too must reflect on not their own practices and those of their coaching partner.

Jan Robertson (2005) has further developed the concept of peer coaching in education as a form of professional development for educational leaders.ⁱⁱ Her notion is to not only establish peer coaching partnerships between educational leaders but also include a facilitator in this process. She terms this facilitator an “academic professional”. This is similar to Ramsay’s (1994) study where the school principal often took this role. Jan Robertson (2005) suggests that this person is crucial for providing an outside perspective, which is important for ensuring effective change. The role of the facilitator is not often documented in studies of peer coaching and is therefore under-researched. It is unclear as to what impact, if any, this person has on the success or failure of peer coaching relationships.

Peer coaching in initial teacher education programmes

Peer coaching, or a comparable concept, has been used in pre-service teacher education to support students’ while undertaking their field practicumsⁱⁱⁱ (Anderson et al., 2005; Lu, 2010). Several studies have investigated the role of the peer coach (or student mentor) in pre-service teacher education, focusing on the outcomes of the peer coaching partnership (for example, Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2008; Scanlon, 2008, 2009).

The question of why students want to participate in peer coaching is not often asked. What are the intrinsic motivations of participants? Lennox-Terrion and Leonard (2010) investigated the impetus of paid peer mentors employed to help improve academic outcomes of pre-service students, compared with that of unpaid peer helpers. They discovered, perhaps surprisingly, that being paid is not an exceptionally motivating factor for peer coaches/mentors. Many stated that the desire to help, or to give something back to the institution, was more of an incentive.

Britton and Anderson (2010) imply that peer coaching for pre-service teachers is an underutilised model. They suggest that if peer coaching is implemented well then it could be beneficial to pre-service student teachers, fostering an environment where collaboration and striving for improvement becomes the norm. They also suggest that good implementation of peer coaching would mean that available human resources (for example, lecturers) would be better used (Britton & Anderson, 2010).

Pre-service students are under many different pressures and often have high levels of anxiety. These stresses, either real or perceived, can take up a lot of lecturers’

pastoral care and academic advice time. Britton and Anderson (2010) suggest that a well-implemented peer coaching programme running alongside traditional pastoral care could alleviate some of the need for this extra support from teaching staff.

A further omission in the literature is apparent. Although the use of peer coaching in pre-service initial teacher education programmes is fairly well documented in the literature, no such evidence could be found of peer coaching being used in field-based (or centre-based as it is sometimes termed) initial teacher education programmes.

The studies conducted by Britton and Anderson (2010) and Heirdsfield et al. (2008) focused on the commencement and first year of the training programme, as this is where, they suggest, students need the most support in order to continue successfully on the programme. This is a narrow view. There are many factors to consider when investigating why students are not successful in their tertiary programmes. These include, but are not limited to, issues such as workload, family commitments, financial pressure and academic ability and can happen at any time during the study period. There is a clear gap in the literature here, yet these issues are important and may help explain why students fail to succeed in tertiary study.

Peer coaching for postgraduate students

Various studies investigated benefits of peer coaching with postgraduate students. Devenish et al. (2009) found that their postgraduate experiences, in which peers supported each other collaboratively, much like peer coaching, were perceived to be one critical factor in their success. Ladyshevsky (2006) had similar results in his study with managerial education postgraduate students. In fact he suggests that peer coaching should be considered as a feasible strategy for enabling students to learn and to critically reflect, and could become part of the curriculum framework for postgraduate programmes. It could be argued that this is in fact important for all tertiary students and discussion of the need for critical reflection (supported by peer coaching) should not be limited to postgraduate study only. Baron and Carr (2008) go further when they argue that using peer mentoring with international students can reduce cross cultural communication issues which so commonly arise. With the growth in international interest to complete tertiary study in New Zealand, this is an important point to note. Clearly, as with pre-service teacher education, peer coaching is worthwhile in many ways and including this model within the curriculum, as part of a programme of study, has been shown to augment student success.

Summary

While it is evident that there has been some research in the area of peer coaching for pre-service student teachers in primary and secondary teaching programmes and postgraduate students (Baron & Carr, 2008; Devenish et al., 2009; Ladyshevsky, 2006), studies investigating the use of peer coaching with early childhood education student teachers are lacking. There is also a particular gap in the peer coaching literature about students undertaking a field-based programme of study, as opposed to pre-service. There is a need for more extensive study of peer coaching in these particular areas to investigate the potential of peer coaching in these sectors.

Conclusion

Peer coaching can be used as a professional development tool across many settings, such as business, health services and education. The reviewed literature shows that peer coaching can be an effective model for students studying at a tertiary level in a pre-service initial teacher education programme, but is perhaps not used as much as it could be at this level. It must also be acknowledged, however, that there are limitations to what a peer coaching relationship can achieve. Factors such as time, commitment and knowledge can all impact on the success and therefore benefits of a peer coaching programme.

Peer coaching is defined in this review as a reciprocal relationship based on trust where partners support each other to find solutions. It is clear that for peer coaching to be successful there are certain skills which need to be taught to potential coaches. It is evident that to maintain and establish an effective peer coaching relationship peer coaches need to uphold respect and confidentiality for their partners. As with any relationship, effective communication is the key to a successful peer coaching partnership. Coaches need to commit to the relationship and must be prepared to overcome barriers, such as time or work commitments, if peer coaching is to be successful. However, if the right support is given by the peer coaching facilitator and if the peer coaches themselves have the required attributes and motivation, then peer coaching could be a worthwhile support tool which in the long run may help with student success in all areas of the education sector.

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ⁱ In the early childhood, primary and secondary education sectors in New Zealand, the Education Review Office regularly reviews early childhood centres and schools to ensure quality learning environments for children are maintained.

ⁱⁱ For the purpose of her study, Jan Robertson (2005) has not used position titles, choosing rather to group all those in education as 'leaders'. This is because she believes that everyone in education should take up leadership responsibilities regardless of the position they hold.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sustained placements in a school classroom or early childhood education setting.