

## **Leading Coaching in Schools**

### **EAZ case study:**

#### **Coaching across schools**

**EAZ:** Bedford Educational Action Zone

#### **Background**

In January 2005 the Bedford EAZ (of five years' standing) transformed into the Bedford Excellence Cluster comprising 22 schools – two secondary, five middle, 13 primary, one special and one nursery school. Under LEA reorganisation, this group of schools was recently incorporated, with 11 other schools into the Bedford Learning Community.

#### **School context and the background to the development of coaching**

The possibility of an embryonic 'coaching culture' within the EAZ was first mooted by heads following a successful residential course on 'structured mentoring' in 2000, but no capacity was created within the Zone for this to be developed systematically.

This was followed in 2003 by the distribution to all teaching staff within the EAZ of a 12-competence teaching framework contained in the mentoring Handbook 'Foundation for Excellence'. This was intended to encourage and underpin detailed dialogue on teaching and learning across EAZ. Again, however, there was no system development or capacity created to embed this in practice.

In 2003 one of the EAZ middle schools went into Special Measures following a poor Ofsted. In the summer of 2004, six colleagues, including the heads of both secondary schools, the EAZ Director and Deputy Director, the EAZ EMAG Coordinator and a Senior Lecturer from De Montfort University, began to mentor/coach individual teachers who were seen as being 'at risk' of continued underperformance. It was successful in that it improved the technology of pedagogy with the teachers involved and also led the head and the school staff to feel supported by EAZ colleagues in a non threatening way. Following a recent Ofsted visit the school was deemed to be making 'good progress' and is expected to come out of special measures at the next inspection visit. The head of the school cited this mentoring as one of the key reasons for progress.

## **Why coaching?**

If the school was to come out of special measures, a significant improvement in classroom practice was seen to be essential. One-to-one mentor/coaching which involved working in the actual classroom context was seen as the key lever for this.

This focus on mentor/coaching grew from the idea that it is only by operating at the point of professional practice – in the classroom – and doing this in a sustained way that lasting change can be brought about.

The aim of the exercise was simple, focussed and instrumental: to improve the classroom practice of a number of identified teachers so that the school would come out of special measures. In the given context, after some initial anxiety, the mentoring was welcomed.

## **How has coaching developed?**

At this initial stage no formal model of mentor/coaching was used. The mentor/coaches brought their own ideas/language to the situation. This made discussion in the mentor/coaching team quite difficult as it was clear that each was conceiving of the mentor/coaching activity in different ways, adopting different approaches and using different models.

Nevertheless it was clear that mentor/coaching was proceeding via a process of observation, feedback, dialogue, target setting and forward planning, and even in the absence of consensus about underlying conceptions and principles this was enough to drive progress. (This suggests, as Bruner argues, that a dialogue between the more experienced - or successful - and those who are less so is a key driver of professional development, whatever models are being used.)

During the early autumn term 2004, it became clear from a new head's audit and from LEA visits that a second middle school was at serious risk of going into special measures if it were to be inspected and, when an Ofsted Inspection was announced, the EAZ decided to take a more systematic approach and commission a cross-school team.

This comprised volunteers from the EAZ 'Teaching a Learning Tutors', individuals in each of the EAZ schools who were given free time to develop teaching a learning practice. A group of 10 mentor/coaches was brought together and trained in the techniques and principles of the structured mentoring approach contained in the handbook 'Foundation for Excellence'

This approach adopts a teacher-generated, 12-competence model of teaching and learning with detailed 'action-centred' questions (ie where the answer to particular practical questions is 'no', direct forms of professional response are implied). This was underpinned by a counselling model based on John Heron's therapeutic six category intervention analysis (prescriptive, informative, supportive, confronting, cathartic, catalytic). And the approach was theorised using the conceptual framework from Donald Schon's work on the 'reflective practitioner' (ie 'knowing-in-action', 'constructions', 'reflection-in- action', 'reflection-on-action').

The team of mentor/coaches was deployed into the 'at risk' school and as a result of this and good leadership from the new head, the school gained a 'satisfactory with good features' grading in its Ofsted in November 2004.

This success has set in train a plan to systematically develop a 'coaching culture' across the Bedford Learning Community with a particular focus on:

- instructional leadership and management
- school leadership and management

Commissioning of the training components for this begins in March 2005, and training in mentor/coaching will begin in the summer term of 2005.

In order to foster the development of a common language across the learning community it has become important to achieve some clarity about the terms 'mentoring' and 'coaching'. We are considering a conception where:

- **Mentoring** is seen as being generic, holistic and broadly based, and operates in a context where a professional colleague accepts responsibility for nurturing the general professional growth of another over a sustained period of time (eg NQT induction or mentoring someone through a sustained period of professional support and development)
- **Coaching** on the other hand is more short term and narrowly focussed, and operates in a context where development is being sought in a particular area of professional practice (eg 'teaching performance' including issues of energy, enthusiasm, voice, gesture, posture, movement etc); it therefore lends itself to the idea of coaching specialisms.

In this conception a 'mentor' will engage in coaching conversations across a broad range of teaching competences over a sustained period of time, while someone acting as a 'coach' will usually only focus on one. Clearly where practice ranges back and forth across general and specialist support, and short and longer term involvement, the expression 'mentor-coach' is appropriate, but it is nevertheless analytically useful to have the 'ideal type' distinction.

The core ingredients of this 'mentoring-coaching' approach are seen to be:

- a structured (competence-based) dialogue
- carried out in the context of observed/shared practice
- secured by principles of therapeutic intervention (John Heron)
- underpinned by an explanatory psychology of growth (Donald Schon)
- and involving a practitioner wishing to improve professional practice (for what ever reason)

The driving force behind these more strategic developments has been the Executive Group of the new Bedford Learning Community

## **Coaching skills and qualities**

The core qualities and skills of a successful mentor-coach are seen as being:

- Emotional intelligence (self awareness, self management, empathy and social skill)
- The key social skills of active listening and therapeutic intervention
- Knowledge and experience of the professional area concerned
- Evidence of successful practice (and therefore credibility) in the area, including an ability to model and demonstrate.

For mentor-coaching to be successful it must be sought by the coachee (ie wanted and desired), though this situation may be negotiated/brokered by an effective mentor-coach after initial anxiety about the idea.

## **How is coaching practised?**

Thus far coaching has taken place in the context of an external threat which has brought colleagues together from a range of schools and backgrounds

It has been conducted in the context of dialogue around actual classroom practice with a narrowly defined outcome – avoiding or coming out of special measures.

It is hoped however, to systematically develop a ‘coaching culture’ across Bedford Learning Community schools over the coming two years such that strategic capacity building measures (eg creative timetabling) leads to mentor-coaching becoming embedded in the daily practices of the schools in Bedford.

## **Leading coaching**

The development of mentor-coaching is being funded and driven through the ‘Leadership’ strand of the Excellence Cluster as part of a three year strategic plan.

The key driver is the training of mentor-coaches through a series of one day introductory workshops, which will provide initial conceptual tools and models, and establish small communities of practice which will be sustained by skilled facilitation as development and enquiry groups

These communities of practice will be created both in generic mentoring and specific coaching areas (initially the latter are likely to be in behaviour management, gifted and talented, assessment for learning, language development, and environment).

It will be for the schools across the Bedford Learning Community – with guidance - to alter their structures to utilise this new resource to best effect.

The strategy will be underpinned by funding from a series of other initiatives (Excellence Cluster, LIG, BIP, Primary Strategy etc).;

### **Is there any evidence of benefits or impact?**

Strong evidence has come from three exercises in the middle schools not only in instrumental terms but also in terms of building social capital for continuing collaborative activity. A clear outcome - in staff, pupil and parental terms – is no longer being part of the debilitating context of a school in special measures.

### **Collaboration, networks and wider benefits**

Above all, our experience thus far has demonstrated the potential of collaborative activity to achieve outcomes that are beyond the power and scope individual schools. As such it is one more piece of evidence that networked learning communities underpinned by the principles of open, reciprocal collaboration are where the future of transformational practice lies.

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