

Review

Adults helping adults: Teacher-initiated supervisory option for professional development

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This paper discusses peer supervision among teachers. It considers the foci, practices, problem and potential importance of peer supervision in facilitating professional growth teachers. Peer supervision or peer coaching is a vital part for professional development that enables teachers to make changes in their instructional practices and procedures for the purposes of improving student performance. According to James et al. (1992), “peer supervision breathes life into a school system. It makes professionals. It is exciting. It works”. Other terms that have been used to refer to peer supervision include collegial supervision (Daresh and Playko, 1995); and co-operative professional development (Harris and Ovando, 1992). The term supervision, as used in this paper, refers to “a process by which teachers work together for the purpose of mutual professional development” (Heller, 1989).

Key words: Adults, helping, teacher, initiated, peer supervision, professional development.

DEFINITIONS OF PEER SUPERVISION

The literature indicates many definitions of the phrase, peer supervision. For example, according to Daresh and Playko (1995), this term refers to a process by which two or more teachers supervise each other for their own professional growth; by observing each other's class and by sharing the feedback. Also, James et al. (1992) regarded peer supervision as “a process of professional guidance, help and growth”. Despite the differing conceptions of peer supervision, several writers in teacher education seem to agree on the following five definitions: (a) “a steadfast model of professional development to be used by and among teachers for the purpose of improving their instructional skills” (Dantonio, 1995); (b) a dialogue for seeking underlying realities, for considering alternatives and consequences, and for formulating hypotheses (Roth and Adler, 1985, cited in Gloria and Stover, 1994); (c) “teachers helping teachers reflect on and improve teaching skills needed to implement knowledge gained through staff or curriculum development”

(Sullivan and Glanz, 2000); (d) a process that involves peer teachers working together in an ongoing process to provide mutual support and guidance (London and Sinicki, 1999); and (e) a process in which two or more teachers agree to work together to facilitate their own professional growth, usually by observing each other's classes, giving each other feedback about their observations and share their professional concerns (Glatthorn, 1984).

Therefore, peer supervision or peer coaching is a reciprocal partnership in which colleague teachers examine and analyze each other's instructional work, share feedback about their teaching, and seek alternative solutions for their professional growth with the ultimate purpose of improving student learning.

Justification for peer supervision

Often, professional development programs for teachers are designed by outside experts and then imposed on teachers as a means of facilitating instructional improvement and student learning in schools (Speck and Knipe, 2001). However, as Speck and Knipe note, Teachers are often unhappy about professional development that is

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imposed on them from the top, and of which they have no ownership. Because teachers are the recipients of their professional learning, they should have a great deal of input and ownership in terms of planning, development and implementation of staff development programs. Peer supervision is an alternative strategy for facilitating professional growth of teachers because (a) it is built on the shared knowledge of the teachers themselves (Speck and Knipe, 2001); (b) it is built on the belief that teachers are experts in many ways and have much to offer to each other (Heller, 1989); (c) it is based on the belief that it is the teachers themselves who must assume responsibility of planning and implementing their professional learning; (d) it is founded on teachers' sense of ownership and commitment to improved instructional practices; (e) it is linked to teachers' personal growth, their sense of collegiality, their morale, and their job satisfaction; and (f) peers are usually available in the school and, consequently, they can help each other at short notice when a problem arises (Heller, 1989). As McConnell et al. (1999) noted, many teachers agree that the important rationale for their adoption of instructional methods is the positive experience of other teachers. Therefore, because teachers normally prefer to have their colleagues advice and assist them with instructional work, peer supervision is a necessary vehicle for teachers to work jointly and to learn from one another toward a common goal; professional growth.

Foci of peer supervision

Several writers and scholars hold the view that peer supervision programs for teachers must address specific areas that focus on a variety of professional concerns that meet the needs of teachers involved in this mode of supervision. Productive peer supervision endeavors should focus on two broad areas: classroom and non-classroom concerns.

Classroom concerns

The following major classroom concerns may form a peer supervisory program for teachers: (a) Teaching practices and methods (Gottesman, 2000; Marczely, 2001); (b) instructional improvement (Marczely, 2002; Josack-Curling, 1993); (c) classroom observation (Anderson and Pellicer, 2001; Daresh and Playko, 1995); (d) instructional materials (Kit and Fager, 1998); (e) teaching skills (Anderson and Pellicer, 2001); (f) problem solving (London and Sinicki, 1999); (g) utilization of knowledge of effective (Hosack-Curlin, 1993); and (h) classroom management (Anderson and Pellicer, 2001). According to Marczely (2001), each practice of peer supervision that defines the role and authority of the peer supervision in that context.

Non-classroom concerns

The following non-classroom concerns may be addressed in peer supervision process (Anderson and Pellicer, 2001; Marczely, 2001).

Professional growth: Partners in peer supervision may be involved in a variety of areas that facilitate professional growth, such as: (a) participation in professional training workshops, courses, and classes; (b) contributions to school programs outside the classroom; (c) professional membership; (d) publications; (e) participation in state or national committees; (g) participation in school or district improvement committees; (h) understanding of professional teaching obligations; and (i) implementation of professional development plans.

Interpersonal relationship: The following foci relative to interpersonal relationship may be associated with peer supervision: (a) respect of dignity and worth of others; (b) honesty; (c) consistency; (d) positive attitude; (e) loyalty to the mission of the school; and (f) willingness to follow rules and procedures.

Personal characteristics: The partners in a peer supervision practice may assist each other in the following personal areas: (a) appropriate dress; (b) appearance and grooming; (c) clear, well-modulated speech; (d) dependability; (e) tact and diplomacy; and (f) tolerance for different views.

Peer supervision practices

Peer teachers may be engaged in a variety of practices toward their professional growth. For example, they may coach each other by forming teams of two or more colleagues that work jointly, and in which they observe each other as peers, plan together, and make suggestions to improve performance (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 2002; Wiles and Bondi, 2000). Such working teams, according to Sergiovanni and Starratt, may be involved in clinical supervision of their colleagues by observing each other, by giving informal feedback, and by discussing important teaching issues. Also, in their view, peer teams may focus narrowly on specific concerns identified by the teachers involved. Alternatively, they explained, colleague teams may be focused in order to provide a general feel of teaching. In addition, as concluded by Showers and Joyce (1996), "teachers learn from one another while planning instruction, developing support materials, watching one another's work with students, and thinking together about the impact of their behaviour on their students".

Whatever specific practices are employed in supervision by peers, a major consideration is collaboration, in which, according to Harris and Ovando (1992), “people with diverse expertise work jointly with equal status and shared commitment in order to achieve mutually agreed-upon instructional goals”.

Advantages of peer supervision

Peer supervision has the following major advantages:

1. It gives teachers an opportunity to share instructional knowledge, techniques and practices, materials, and plans (Brady, 1995);
2. It leads to increased areas of basic skills (Acheson and Gall, 2003);
3. It promotes non-threatening and positive approaches to professional development without fear of being judged (Brady, 1995; James et al., 1992);
4. It empowers teachers to control and determine their own professional growth agenda and to test and experiment their own theories of teaching and learning (Brady, 1995; Heller, 1989);
5. It fosters a spirit of collegial interaction among teachers and reduces feelings of professional isolation (Brady, 1995; Gloria and Stover, 1994);
6. It increases feelings of self-worth of teachers by acknowledging their dignity and contributions to professional growth (Brady, 1995; Heller, 1989); and
7. It provides an extra pair of “eyes” and “ears” to record what is going on in the classroom, which is then followed up by discussion and sharing (Heller, 1989).

Problems with peer supervision

Although supervision by peers is a valuable means for teacher development, it has several problems:

- i. Teachers might be disaffected by judgments by colleagues (Acheson and Gall, 2003);
- ii. The lack of reliability procedures, credibility to outside audiences, precedent, and teacher preparation (Peterson, 1995);
- iii. The usual negative teacher culture, especially for peer evaluation (Peterson, 1995; Richard and Lockhart, 1991, 1992);
- iv. Because peer supervision is intended to improve specific instructional practices of participating teachers, it may not solve some critical challenges in public education which demand immediate attention and focuses on classroom concerns, has its own rubric and creative solutions (James et al., 1992); and The possibility of conflicts arising due to different values or interpersonal communication and problems of a colleague judging a partner’s work (Marczely, 2001).

These problems, no doubt, raise special challenges for all

the stakeholders in peer supervision.

Facilitating peer supervision

The following strategies may be employed to promote effective supervision by peer:

1. Teachers should be prepared for peer supervision, for example, by undergoing training in the observation and conferencing associated with peer coaching to develop a common language and an understanding of what this practice entails (Acheson and Smith, 1986; Glickman et al., 2001; Oliva and Pawlas, 2001; Roy, 1998);
2. High teacher commitment to peer supervision. (Acheson and Gall, 2003);
3. Availability of a facilitator committed to peer supervision and whose task is to organize, coordinate, and to communicate with participants (James et al., 1992);
4. Relationship of mutual respect, openness, rapport, confidentiality, collaboration, and support among colleague teachers (Acheson and Gall, 1997; Collins, 1991, cited in McCulla, 1994; Glickman et al., 2001; Richards and Lockhart, 1991, 1992; Strother, 1989; Stronge and Ostrander, 1997; Oliva and Pawlas, 2001);
5. Peer supervision must be voluntary (Marczely, 2001);
6. Providing ongoing process of teacher input and participating through surveys, discussions, and support groups is imperative (Hosack-Curlin, 1993);
7. Administrative support – such as providing resources, including time – to enable peer supervision to function (James et al., 1992; Strother, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1995);
8. Successful improvement efforts in peer supervision must be a teacher initiated (Marczely, 2001).

The roles of key stakeholders

The major roles and responsibilities of the key stakeholders in a peer coaching program are discussed further.

The teacher

In a peer supervisory process, the teacher should play the following five major roles (Gottzman, 2000): (a) commit to peer coaching and to instructional improvement; (b) be willing to develop and to use a common language of collaboration in order to discuss the total teaching act without praise or blame; (c) request observation and observe as coach when requested; (d) be open-minded and willing to look for better ways of conducting classroom business; and (e) act as a colleague and as a professional.

The peer supervision

The supervisor’s role is key to success of any peer

coaching program. A peer supervisor should play the following two roles (Marczely, 2001): (a) halt the spread of isolationism among teachers and (b) assist teachers in establishing new ways of cooperating with colleagues. To make meaningful and objective classroom observation, especially, as suggested by Marczely, a peer supervisor should be trained in techniques of clinical supervision and endeavor to acquire the following skills and attributes: (a) skills to make effective decisions; (b) ability to deal with conflict; (c) communication skills that built trust; (d) ability to work with other group members; and (e) conferencing and related skills.

The school principal

The school principal's leadership is a major ingredient in peer supervision. The principal can facilitate peer coaching in the school in the following major ways (Huddle, 1995; Garmston, 1987; Gottesman, 2000; Hosack-Curlin, 1993, Marczely, 2000): (a) demonstrating that he or she values peer coaching; (b) encouraging peer coaching and conferencing; (c) providing desired resources, such as funds, to support the peer supervision program; establishing peer coaching teams; (d) encouraging teachers to take risks associated with peer coaching for professional growth; (e) facilitating publicity for peer coaching activities at meetings with teachers, parents, and the community and in school and district newsletters; and (f) providing release time necessary for peer coaching.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Peer supervision is an important supervisory option, especially in schools where teachers have already established a climate of openness and trust. This option of supervision is simple, cost effective, non-threatening, and can provide teachers with regular, ongoing professional support for instructional improvement and a potential for decreasing their professional isolation.

It is important that the school principal ensures the success of peer supervision programs in their schools. Also, attempts must be made by all the major key players to join forces to facilitate peer assistance programs in the schools.

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