

Peer Instructional Coaching and Conferencing

Teachers supporting teachers: A powerful, strength-based model for teacher professional learning.

Introduction

Reciprocal peer coaching – teachers supporting teachers – is a powerful, strength-based model of teacher professional learning and is well supported by research (Showers & Joyce, 1996; Joyce & Calhoun, 2018; Alam et al., 2020; Yee, 2016). Though commonly used in countries such as Australia and Canada, to date it remains a relatively new form of teacher professional learning in Ireland.

When introducing peer coaching to teachers, they tend to relate it to the well-known concept of sports coaching, where an ‘expert’ directs the work of a less-experienced novice. Reciprocal peer coaching is different in that involves two colleagues coming together to guide each other, in a reciprocal or equal manner, through structured conversations. Neither is considered an ‘expert’: they are there simply to guide each other through a respectful, supportive, metacognitive process.

Joyce and Showers (2002) first highlighted the impact of peer coaching to support teacher instructional change initiatives. Their research, outlined in Table 1, revealed that when peer coaching was combined with other professional learning strategies, it had a significant impact on helping teachers transfer new learning into practice – increasing the likelihood of sustaining change.



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Reciprocal peer coaching is a powerful way to support teacher change and is well supported by research. Yet it remains a relatively new form of teacher professional learning in Ireland. This article outlines a recent pilot programme with teachers, deputies, and principals who explored peer instructional coaching and conferencing and trialled it in their schools. It considers the potential of this support strategy in relation to Ireland’s current educational policy landscape.

Training components and attainment of outcomes (% of participants)			
Components	Knowledge of content	Skill implementation	Classroom application
Study of theory	10%	5%	0%
Demonstration	30%	20%	0%
Practice	60%	60%	5%
Peer coaching	95%	95%	95%

Table 1: Training components and attainment of outcomes (adapted from Joyce & Showers, 2002)

Pilot programme

Over a nine-month period in 2023–2024, a pilot programme supported by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) brought together 43 principals, deputies, and teachers from 13 schools to pilot the use of peer instructional coaching and conferencing. The aim was for teachers to (a) assess the usefulness and value of peer coaching and conferencing as a support strategy, and (b) trial the strategies in their schools.

Teachers attended three two-day workshops in school-based teams, where they developed coaching skills and learnt how to supportively ‘conference’ a peer. Adapted from Hunter (1980), conferencing is a process of gathering observational classroom data and providing structured feedback to a peer on an aspect of practice they would like to develop. Table 2 outlines the broad similarities and differences between peer coaching and conferencing adopted for the programme.

Peer instructional	
Coaching	Conferencing
Consists of three 'types' of coaching dialogue: 1. Planning-focused 2. Solution-focused 3. Reflection-focused	Consists of five 'types' of conferencing models: 1. A - Non-evaluative 2. B - Generating options 3. C - Problem-solving 4. D - Evaluative 5. E - Professional growth
May or may not invite a peer into the classroom	Invites a peer into classroom
May or may not use criteria (rubrics, critical attribute list) to guide dialogue	Uses agreed criteria (rubrics, critical attribute list) to guide conference
May or may not use data during dialogue	Uses data-gathered processes, agreed by peer prior to conference
Peers select who they want to work with and set their own goals	
Peers work intentionally to support one another in instructional change	
A framework is used to help guide peers through the process	
Peers refine and use specific interpersonal skills, such as active listening, open questioning, paraphrasing, and wait time	
Peers develop positive, agentic relationships and build trust and empathy	

Table 2: Comparing peer coaching and conferencing (Saunders, 2023)

Between each set of professional learning sessions, the teams returned to their schools to trial their newfound skills and reflect on their experiences in relation to relevant research and literature. Feedback from those involved aligns with findings from numerous studies showing that coaching and conferencing are beneficial and effective at fostering teacher agency and growth. Participants reported that the teacher-led processes provided a much-needed structured, collaborative safe space for professional conversations about developing instruction and reduced feelings of 'implementation isolation' in the classroom. All those involved in the pilot went on to establish some form of coaching and conferencing programme in their schools.

Conclusion

With the recent review of Junior Cycle, and the current Senior Cycle redevelopment, Ireland is witnessing unprecedented curriculum reform (Gleeson et al., 2020). Now more than ever, teachers need support to enact the changes demanded of them. While mentoring is firmly established in the Irish educational landscape and is widely acknowledged as an effective mechanism to support teacher induction (Smyth et al., 2016; Nally & Ladden, 2020), there remains a gap in the widespread use of similar structured collegial support structures for experienced teachers.

Cosán reminds us that teachers are 'autonomous and responsible professionals' who are ideally situated to decide what learning most 'benefits them and their students' (Teaching Council, n.d.). Feedback from the schools in this programme revealed that reciprocal peer coaching and conferencing are powerful tools that create highly collaborative teacher-driven learning spaces and have the potential to support teachers and schools to achieve sustainable change. The benefits gained from working collegially and focusing on professional growth are well worth the investment for schools, teachers, and most importantly, students.

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