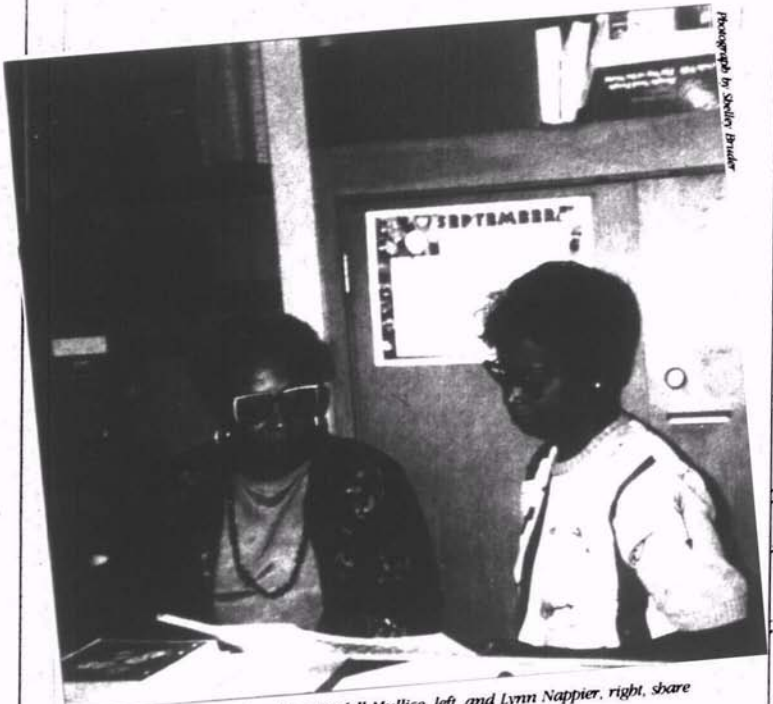
GEORGEA MOHLMAN SPARKS AND SHELLEY BRUDER

Before and After Peer Coaching

School-based peer coaching in two Ann Arbor schools has improved collegiality and encouraged teachers to try new practices.



Photograph by Shelley Bruder

Ann Arbor Public School teachers Verdell Mullice, left, and Lynn Nappier, right, share techniques for student motivation and participation.

In summer 1985 the Ann Arbor, Michigan, Public Schools (AAPS) appointed a staff development consultant—Shelley Bruder—to develop a peer coaching program in two elementary schools.[1] At this time AAPS also hired an evaluator—Georgea Sparks—to study the effects of peer coaching when implemented by all teachers in the two schools. The study focused on whether peer coaching would improve collegiality in the schools, encourage experimentation with new practices, and enhance teaching effectiveness. The study also examined teachers' reactions to peer coaching and the benefits of the process.

In August the district presented the project requirements at principal meetings. After consulting with their staffs, two principals volunteered—School A to begin in the fall and School B to start in the winter. Both principals were proponents of effective teaching and peer coaching, and the teachers of both schools had gone through at least 10 hours of training in research-based effective teaching practices (Hunter 1976, Rosenshine and Stevens 1986). School A had been involved in a two-year school im-

provement project that emphasized effective teaching.

The two schools approached the Peer Coaching Project from different perspectives. School A was committed to peer coaching before the project was proposed to them. The school improvement planning team and the principal had proposed the idea to the staff the prior spring, and all had been enthusiastic.

In contrast, School B's principal was the main proponent of peer coaching in that school. Since collaborative decision-making was not an established norm in School B, many teachers were doubtful and had rejected the proposal in the fall. After what a few teachers called "considerable nudging" by the principal, they accepted the project in winter. Some teachers in this school did not participate in the initial peer coaching sessions but joined the project later after they saw how successful and nonthreatening it was.

The Peer Coaching Project

The 24 teachers in School A attended a short meeting with the consultant in October to learn about the project and its time requirements. Before any peer coaching began, each teacher was videotaped teaching for 20 minutes. This videotape was for the teacher's use only, not for evaluation or outside analysis. Next, everyone met again briefly before school to learn how to observe, record events, and give feedback. The consultant reviewed selected practices from the effective teaching training (such as motivation, lesson design, or active participation), so that teachers could concentrate on these in their observations. Finally, teachers wrote down three preferred coaching partners, and the consultant made the assignments.

The consultant and the teachers met every few weeks throughout the semester to discuss the peer coaching process and to review a new skill area. Each coaching pair did four to six observations using modified versions of Cummings' Interactive Teaching Map (Cummings 1983). The consultant substituted in the teachers' classes, demonstrated conferencing techniques, and served as a coach upon request. At the end of the semester each teacher was videotaped again and encouraged to analyze the tape.

The 17 teachers in School B followed these same processes between January and May, but with a different order of review topics. During these months School A continued peer coaching with less outside support.

Results of the Study

All teachers completed rating-scale questionnaires before and after the project. In the spring, an outside evaluator interviewed 19 teachers in School A and 17 teachers in School B. The results of the evaluator's analysis of the questionnaires and interview protocols are summarized here.

Observation, advice, and feedback from others. Several questions dealt with the frequency and helpfulness of feedback from administrators and colleagues. When asked before the project how often other teachers observed them, 14 percent of the participants responded "frequently" or "occasionally." At the end of the year, 62 percent gave one of these responses.

Before the project, 25 percent said they received feedback on their instruction "frequently" or "occasionally," compared to an 89 percent response rate after peer coaching. Clearly, peer coaching increased teachers' opportunities for observation and feedback.

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Before the project, 52 percent of the teachers in the two schools rated the advice they received regarding instruction as "very helpful." After peer coaching, 75 percent did so. Apparently, the reviews of effective practices and the collegial sharing during the coaching sessions produced helpful professional interaction.

Teachers' comments during the interviews illustrated these positive results. For example, one teacher said, "I could see so much more, and once you're able to see what you are doing—both plus and minus—it's great." Another participant summed up the benefits of more and better feedback, "It's been great opening up to another member of the staff; I had never before explored teaching with another teacher, nor had I gone into depth regarding improving teaching."

Just having videotapes of their teaching was also seen as a valuable source of feedback. One teacher reported her husband's reaction to the tape: "He walked in, watched for a while, and said, 'Boy, you really work hard.'" Another teacher showed the tape to her class and had them analyze it for their noise level and behavior.

Collegiality. Two items on the questionnaire related to collegiality. Before the project, 25 percent of the sample as a whole reported that they discussed effective teaching "frequently" (as opposed to "occasionally," "rarely," or "never") with their peers. After the project 40 percent said they discussed teaching "frequently." Before the project 18 percent said they "frequently" turned to someone else to help them with an instructional need or concern; after the project, 45 percent said they did so.

During the interviews, 13 teachers said that "having a professional colleague as a partner" was one of the main personal benefits of the Peer Coaching Project. Several comments echoed this sentiment; for example, one teacher said, "The most important part is getting the chance to get into another teacher's room. My doors are now open and will remain so."

The Peer Coaching Project succeeded in increasing teacher-to-teacher interaction in both schools. Both the principals and 25 teachers reported much more sharing of teaching ideas and discussion of instruction in the lounge, in the halls, and at lunch. Typical comments were, "Now people are talking more about their lessons and less about individual kids. They are sharing techniques for motivation and active participation. They are teaching and learning from each other."

Experimentation. Three queries on the questionnaire addressed experimentation. Before peer coaching, 54 percent of the teachers said they "frequently" tried something new in their classrooms (all had been through effective teaching training recently). After peer coaching, this number went up to 70 percent. Before training, 35 percent of the group said that when trying something new in their classes, they were "very confident" (as opposed to "confident," "somewhat confident," or "very lacking in confidence"). After training, 67 percent said they were "much more confident" when trying new practices. One teacher said, "I have taught for nine years, and this is the biggest year of professional growth I've ever had."

Finally, teachers were asked, "When you try a new technique for the first time and it doesn't work well, how likely are you now to try it again?" Before training, 13 percent responded "very likely" (as opposed to "somewhat likely," "not very likely," or "not at all likely"); after training, 59 percent were "very likely" to try again. As one teacher put it, "It brought to life a lot of things I know I should do and had tried, but had not continued. It gave me an impetus, having a colleague I respect critique my teaching."

Several teachers also commented on how much more "automatic" they were with the techniques they had reviewed as part of the peer coaching project. One teacher reflected, "Before the project, using lesson design was a conscious, deliberate effort. Now the concepts are much more a part of my daily teaching."

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Student learning. At the end of the first year, 70 percent of the teachers said that their students were "very likely" learning more as a result of the skills they had gained from the Peer Coaching Project. In the interviews, 27 teachers said that their students were definitely more attentive and more actively involved in lessons. One noted that the work on motivation and reinforcement had "helped increase self-esteem and reduce behavior problems."

Nine teachers reported greater student success, and some backed up their claims with specific examples. For example, one teacher reported all As and Bs on her test of fractions—"better results than any comparable group from prior years!" Another noted, "The evidence of the effectiveness of these techniques is in the success levels on tests I gave after I taught something using lesson design. The information used to go in one ear and out the other. Now they retain it so much longer."

Concerns and comfort with peer coaching. Creating a supportive climate for participation is an important aspect of implementing peer coaching. Teachers may feel threatened by the idea of having a peer in their classroom "observing" them. In the Ann Arbor Schools Peer Coaching Project, staff made every effort to create readiness and trust before any observations took place. Several factors contributed to the healthy climate. First, the entire teaching staff had to agree to participate. Also, the consultant was on-site at least three days a week. And teachers' concerns were carefully attended to.

When asked what was their greatest concern about participating in the Peer Coaching Project, 24 out of 36 teachers mentioned competing demands for their time, getting overcommitted, and so on. Eleven said they had been worried that the peer observations would be evaluative or judging: "I don't mind making mistakes, but I don't like having an audience." Surprisingly, 13 teachers said they had had no concerns at the beginning and were eager to try it.

Hall and Loucks (1978) have highlighted the importance of attending to the concerns of teachers as they are asked to implement something new. How were these teachers' concerns about peer coaching attended to? Sixteen teachers commented on the consultant's supportiveness. Typical remarks are, "She did a nice job of anticipating our concerns and dealing with them" and "She made it painless."

Teachers also viewed as "very helpful" the substitute teaching provided by the consultant or a substitute while they did their observations (12 comments). Other comments referred to the confidentiality of the process, the well-organized project, and the short modeling sessions. One teacher summed it up, "There was no pressure. She told us, 'We'll take it step by step. I'll help you.'"

Another factor that allayed teachers' concerns was that the principals were required to participate in the project. The principals were observed as they taught demonstration lessons and as they observed their coaching partners. As one teacher put it, "If he can be that gutsy, I guess we can take some chances too." Interestingly, two teachers who were being evaluated that year selected the principal as a partner. They felt their evaluations would

be more thorough when linked to peer coaching.

Collegiality and Experimentation

In spite of some initial differences between the two schools in their approaches to the Peer Coaching Project, the outcomes reflected by the questionnaires and interviews indicate that teachers in both schools became comfortable with the process and found it useful in improving collegiality, experimentation, and student learning.

If we want to ensure the success of school improvement and staff development, creating school norms of collegiality and experimentation is crucial. This study indicates that an entire school, with proper support, can implement peer coaching that results in greater communication about and experimentation with teaching techniques.□

1. Schools with successful staff development programs are characterized by norms of collegiality and experimentation (Little 1982). One process used to increase these norms is peer coaching.

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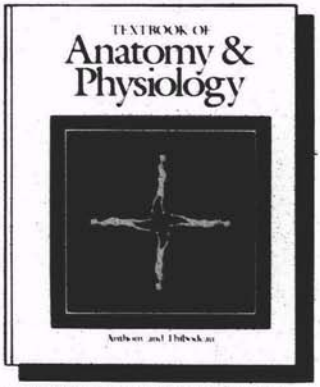
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