

Book Review

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***Coaching Educational Leadership: Building Leadership Capacity through Partnership*
Robertson J. (2008) London: Sage ISBN 978-1-84787-404-7**

In her quietly radical book *Coaching Educational Leadership*, Jan Robertson offers a structured and supported process for school leaders to work collaboratively towards their self-defined professional goals, and through this to support their own professional growth and that of their organisations. The coaching approach and framework she advocates derives from a series of grounded theory research projects and subsequent trialling, in all over a period of fifteen years. Since it builds on the experience of school leaders and has been widely trialled, readers can have confidence that it works.

Jan Robertson, until recently the Director of the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the University of London's Institute of Education, divides her book onto three main sections. The first covers the theory, looking first at the coaching model and the research and rationale supporting it. She then makes the case for educational leadership and the essential contribution to it from coaching. Coaching is seen as a boundary breaking experience between theory and practice, and she also makes clear links between this and action research. The second section covers practice and includes a number of case studies to illuminate the clear practical advice, which includes advice on selecting a coaching partner and describes both a single coaching session and the structure of a year's programme. The range of skills is explored, from initial development of careful listening through to evaluation of the whole experience. There is also a chapter on troubleshooting the relationship and how to deal with possible problems. There is clear guidance on facilitation and how the experience of coaching for school leaders can support the development of coaching within the school. Throughout is a focus on developing agency and self-efficacy. The third section looks at boundary breaking from a more radical perspective, suggesting how educational leaders successfully engaged in coaching can take their skills and experience to a higher level and in wider contexts.

The original research was conducted in New Zealand in the 1980s, where the move to local management for schools highlighted the lack of 'specific job related professional opportunities for leadership development'. In the intervening twenty-five years the need for systematic educational leadership development has become widely accepted. For example in the UK the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) currently offers a suite of programmes for leadership development. These programmes include middle leadership, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and most recently on system leadership for National Leaders of Education (NLEs). The

NCSL programmes mainly focus on the leader who is aspirant or new at each level, and most include an opportunity for mentoring where novices are supported by experienced practitioners. In contrast the distinctive offer of Jan Robertson's model is to leaders with some experience who wish to continue to develop themselves and their schools, and who wish to work collaboratively in a peer-coaching relationship on the opportunities and potential of their context-specific role. She argues that such collaboration is essential to avoiding the 'learning ceiling'.

For the reader as school leader the book offers an integrated and authentic response to the challenge of the plateau in achievement both for the self and for the school. This places collaboration through coaching not as an espoused value but as a lived activity with self-directed goals.

The book foregrounds situated leadership and the role of leaders in posing their own questions and challenges. It offers both permission and a framework for the individual to engage professionally with a knowledgeable peer on live issues of leadership for learning. It is realistic about the possible pitfalls and how to approach them, and emphasises that the learning comes as much from what does not work as from what does. While the Higher Education (HE) partner contributes to individual partnerships, the implication is a strategic role for HE in leadership development which was lost in reforms over the last thirty years.

One of the strengths of the book is its ability to synthesise knowledge. For example the parallels drawn between the processes of action research and of coaching help create a strong sense of double value: that coaching will support school development as well as that of the individual leader. The book also draws together theory and practice, for example offering an intellectual platform for the Head adopting this approach, as well as detailed pragmatic guidance on setting up a coaching relationship. Coaching is then a strategic management style, but its power is understood through experience.

In this context, Robertson makes very far-reaching claims for coaching: it 'leads to capacity-building leadership, to innovation and to sustainability'; it is 'a powerful learning methodology' which generates 'authentic learning and leadership'; used consistently as a management style it can affect the whole school culture and lead to democratic organisations. It is not surprising that she therefore spends time clearing the mental and psychological space for effective engagement in coaching. There is a focus on developing agency: for example using Foucaultian deconstruction of dominant discourse to understand that the issues the school leader faces are common rather than deriving from personal lack of ability.

The author's model is social constructivism: creating shared meaning through the use of language. This is a powerful position to take in a context dominated by

performativity with its complex and external accountability. In a world where an Ofsted¹ judgment of ‘satisfactory’ is understood to mean ‘not satisfactory’, the creation of shared meaning beyond the imposed framework can become a radical act. A group of three working collaboratively on school issues in the headteacher’s office might seem fairly local in its potential impact. However the book includes an example of such activity leading to change in an aspect of national policy on inspection.

For the reader as professional coach, there is a parallel between Jan Robertson’s account of the debate in the 1980s and 1990s about whether leadership is a discipline in its own right, and current debates within the coaching community about the status and nature of coaching. Thus for the professional coach this is a useful contribution to a growing body of literature, particularly since it is both evidence based and formally researched.

The model suggested here is supported peer coaching, working on live issues while developing coaching skills. This is one point on the wide continuum of coaching practice. The process used is based on the GROW method which derives originally from sports coaching, and which has the advantage of being specific, replicable and memorable. It is also action-focussed and thus links closely with action research.

The model uses coaching triads, but departs from usual practice in that the third party, the HE partner, does not engage as an equal partner but acts throughout as facilitator. The discussion of the range of roles and functions of the facilitator is a useful introduction to facilitation, and a reminder to all participants of the complexity of this role. The researchers anticipated that this role would become redundant as coaching relationships became free-standing. However the research participants indicated that a third party added significant value including greater reflection and perspective, including that deriving from research theory and political dimensions. This reminds us how far education and its leadership are politically situated.

Significantly the model departs from the DCSF/CUREE² model of co-coaching in that it expects more of participants than simply to ‘embed new knowledge and skills from specialist sources’ into practice. Participants are question posers as well as problem solvers and this is an essential part of critical leadership. Robertson argues that modern conceptions of educational leadership can place school leaders as middle managers who

¹ The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is a non-ministerial United Kingdom government department, established on 1st September 1992. It is responsible for inspecting the standards of schools and teachers in England.

² DCSF is the Department for Children, Schools and Families in the UK; CUREE is the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education.

decide how to manage implementation rather than as senior leaders who decide what will be implemented.

For the researcher there is the question of whether critical leadership is possible in an age of performativity, and whether this process offers the conditions to develop and sustain it. The removal of leadership training in education from the remit of HE also removed an essential critical and values-based perspective for planning and judging actions. The focus on question posing is central since it allows school leaders to focus on their educational values. This aspect of the process distinguishes coaching as concerning far more than the tips and techniques which can characterise the weaker forms of mentoring;

For the UK audience the process is in many ways counter-cultural. It distinctively finds a strategic place for HE in leadership development, and foregrounds the school leader's own agency and agenda. In doing this it offers the experienced school leader a tested and engaging method for creative and sustainable development of themselves, their staff and their school.