How New Secondary School Headteachers access Coaching and Mentoring: Support Strategies for New Senior Leaders

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Abstract

This article derives from doctoral research which took a client perspective and a grounded theory approach to investigate how new secondary school headteachers use coaching and mentoring. Six newly appointed headteachers in England were interviewed three times during their first year in post. The article reports one aspect of the findings, namely how newly appointed secondary school headteachers access their coaching and mentoring support. Member checks undertaken with experienced coaches indicate that research findings could be transferable to other circumstances and sectors.

Key words: Headteachers, coaching, mentoring, new leadership

Introduction

In the late 1980s mentoring was proposed as a support strategy for new secondary school headteachers in their first year in post. This followed exploratory research in the US and the UK (Daresh 1986, Weindling and Earley 1987) which found that key challenges for new secondary school headteachers were role clarification, expertise, and socialisation. Coaching and mentoring are now widely endorsed as both a management and a professional development strategy in education for teachers at all levels (Ofsted, 2006; Creasey and Patterson, 2005; GTC, 2007). However, there is no current research exploring how new secondary school headteachers engage with either coaching or mentoring for their own development.

This article reports on one aspect of the findings of a doctoral study which explored how newly appointed secondary school headteachers use coaching and mentoring in their first year in post. The study was qualitative and used a social constructivist version of grounded theory methodology. Part of the originality of the study comes from taking a client perspective, and thus seeing the headteacher as agent in the coach/mentoring process. In this article I report the kinds of issue for which the new secondary school headteachers accessed coaching and mentoring, and where they found that coach/mentoring support.

Literature

Systematic reviews of research evidence about coaching and mentoring for new headteachers (Daresh, 1995; Ehrich *et al.*, 2004; Hobson and Sharp, 2005) have found limited research methodology and a small evidence base. Daresh (1995) found that most research was focused on solving problems rather than developing or testing theory. Ehrich *et al.,* (2004) report that only five of

the 40 articles they reviewed were from the UK. These reviews further show that most research has used an evaluative model (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005) designed to improve practice. In thus prioritising the perspective of the provider, previous research has endorsed an implied theory: that all coaching for new headteachers is scheme-based and dyadic.

There is a substantial literature on the 'shock' of becoming the headteacher (Quong, 2006, Crow, 2007) and the number of headteachers who report that they feel well prepared in advance tends to fall once they take up the post (Earley *et al*., 2002). In a summary review of international research, Hobson *et al*. (2003) report that across more than three decades the problems identified by new headteachers remain consistent apart from issues arising from the specific challenges of the time. Many of the issues identified replicate specific items in a headteachers' job description. Thus it appears that people continually fail to anticipate the complexity and challenge of headship. This may indicate that the wrong candidates are appointed to manage complex pressures; alternatively the role, or the support and socialisation processes, may need adjustment (Crow, 2007), not least in climates of intense change (Gleeson and Husbands, 2001; Hobson *et al*., 2003; Crow, 2007).

Both the professional literature and the policy documents relating to coaching and mentoring for headteachers and others in schools consistently use the phrase 'coaching and mentoring' and do not differentiate between the two. Indeed the analytical approach adopted by CUREE (2005) draws attention to common skills within the three strategies of mentoring, specialist coaching, and collaborative co-coaching. In the practitioner literature of coaching and mentoring there have been many attempts to develop definitions that offer a clear distinction between coaching and mentoring, frequently based on the length of engagement and the level of directiveness from the coach/mentor. Typically, Clutterbuck and Megginson initially argued that mentoring is more holistic and 'concentrates on helping the executive gain his or her own insights' (1999, p. 13).

While Cox *et al*. (2010) acknowledge that 'creating a unique identity of coaching is still an unresolved problem' (p. 3), Megginson *et al*. (2006, p. 5) retrospectively regard the debate as 'largely sterile' since:

> Certain types of both coaching and mentoring are short-term interventions, involving one-way learning, and a relatively high degree of directiveness and certain types are longer-term, facilitative relationships of future learning (Clutterbuck and Megginson 2005, p. 14).

Indeed Garvey (2010, p. 343) argues that 'definition seeks to simplify and reduce... and attempts to polarise', while Zeus and Skiffington (2002) report that in practice organisations of all types may use the terms coaching and mentoring interchangeably. Nevertheless the importance of negotiating a pragmatic definition-in-practice for each coach/mentoring relationship is noted by Clutterbuck and Megginson since:

> clarity of expectations about the role makes a significant difference to the quality of the outcomes (1999, p. 13).

A consistent feature of accounts of both coaching and mentoring is the primacy of the client agenda, and so in this study I used a simple and broad definition of coaching and mentoring: 'a sustained, one-to-one process in which (the headteacher's) particular and individual experience (is) the basis of the agenda' (Bolam *et al.,* 1995).

Clutterbuck (1998, p.10) proposes a 'behavioural matrix' comparing the roles of Coach, Guardian, Network Contact and Counsellor as constituent parts of the mentor role. This analysis indicates the flexibility required of the coach/mentor, and indeed Male (2006) observes that from the perspective of a new headteacher as coachee/mentee:

> it is vital to note that mentoring does not need to be supplied by just one person and, although you may chose an official mentor or have one appointed to you, you are likely to turn to a number of sources to make sense of your new reality (p. 35).

Therefore it was appropriate to include in this study a sub-question about sources of support beyond the formally identified coach/mentor. This reflected the positioning of the new headteacher as agent in the main research question.

Methodology

This exploratory study took place within a qualitative paradigm, using a social constructivist version of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2008). Social constructivism seeks to understand human activity from the perspective of those experiencing it, and sees knowledge as constructed between people through interaction. In using this methodology I accepted the need to account for the place of the researcher within the research, and was aware that I brought the established professional identities both of headteacher and of professional coach as I developed a new identity as researcher.

Previous research into coaching and new headteachers has focussed on the effectiveness of the dyadic relationship, and thus has comprised mainly evaluations concerned with programme improvement. In assuming the primacy of the dyadic relationship, previous research has foregrounded the perspective of scheme and provider, acknowledging the client perspective as recipient rather than agent. It was therefore appropriate to adopt a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) for this study because of the primacy of client in the research questions, and also because of the lack of developed theory in the field of coaching and mentoring for new headteachers. Prioritising the client perspective produced experiential data where the initial provision of coach/mentor was found by the client to be problematic, and also highlighted the headteachers' strategies to find other routes to satisfactory provision.

Participants for the study were recruited from secondary schools in England where a headteacher vacancy had been advertised in the Times Educational Supplement. Letters of invitation were sent to eighteen headteachers appointed within the timeframe of the study, and the response rate of six indicates that the issue is significant for newly appointed headteachers.

There were three semi-structured interviews with each headteacher research participant, held during their first year in post. Within a coaching and mentoring context, the interviews took three complimentary perspectives: the journey to headship and initial experiences; the experience of headship from the first interview to the second; and finally a perspective on the whole year and their plans for finding support in their second year and beyond. Each interview was transcribed from a digital recording, and NViVo was used to manage and analyse the data. In terms of member checks, four experienced coaches recruited through a modified snowball technique were then asked to comment on the preliminary findings. As one of these coaches worked only in the private sector there is an indication of transferability of findings beyond their immediate context.

Findings

Weindling and Early (1987) expected that newly appointed headteachers would receive coach/mentoring from a more experienced colleague from within the local authority. However, thirty years later the headteachers in this research identified three methods by which pairing with a coach/mentor was arranged; these can be characterised as allocation, matching and self-selection. 'Allocation' indicates that the new headteacher was not involved in the choice of mentor in any way. Five of the research participants were offered allocated mentors. Of these five the local authority provided two, and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), the local diocese, and the local headteachers' group provided one each. Thus the selection of coach/mentor was sometimes made by organisations other than the local authority. Also, as some research participants were able to influence the choice of coach/mentor, a process other than simple allocation was used.

Where the headteacher was able to influence the choice of coach/mentor, the term 'matched' is used. Two of the research participants had matched coach/mentors, and two mentors were in this category. Both headteachers who were able to influence their choice of their coach/mentor did so through participation in City Challenge programmes[1]. Both coach/mentors were experienced headteachers from outside the local authority of the new headteacher. Each matched coach/mentor brought a defined period of support and an additional resource into the school in terms of time or money.

Where the headteacher identified and recruited a coach/mentor independently and without an intermediary, the term 'self-selected' is used. The self-selected coach/mentor did not bring a resource to the school in terms of additional time or money, and was a cost to the school budget. However, the new headteacher negotiated arrangements, and she also negotiated a flexible approach.

The experience of the six headteachers participating in this research was that the allocated coach/mentor was either inoperative or ineffective. Specifically, the local authorities in which headteachers T and F worked did not allocate a coach/mentor; the coach/mentor for headteacher B arranged no meetings; headteachers G and L were respectively allocated a local headteacher and a local authority officer, and each headteacher reported feeling that there was a conflict of interest but also that their coach/mentor lacked experience of the challenges they were facing; headteacher R was allocated a local headteacher whose leadership approach was contrary to that of the new headteacher.

Thus all the new headteachers in the study needed to exercise agency to find the necessary coaching, mentoring and other development support and four specifically sought out an alternative identified coach/mentor. Therefore an important strength of this research approach has been to incorporate data from headteachers where the initial dyadic approach to coach/mentoring is not effective. Male (2006) suggests, however, that all new headteachers need to look beyond their allocated coach/mentor for their support needs, and the development of a wide support network was also a strategy recommended by coach research participants.

The issues reported by the headteachers in their first year in post could be characterised as common issues, tricky issues and frontier issues:

Common issues were those which all headteachers could expect to encounter, such as how to manage a budget for growth or reduction, or the need to respond to new legislation.

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[1] City Challenge is a highly targeted drive to resolve the cycle of under-achievement among disadvantaged children in primary and secondary schools in three urban regions: London, The Black Country and Greater Manchester. - http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/citychallenge/, Retrieved 2nd February 2011.

Tricky issues were those which were context based, such as the decision about whether or not to exclude a student. Sometimes these arose quickly and needed a rapid response. Frequently the interests of stakeholders were conflicted.

Frontier issues were those where there was no local or perhaps even national experience, such as the challenge of being the first to use a new piece of legislation.

When working on common issues, the headteachers frequently needed to develop new knowledge from or alongside other headteachers. Tricky issues required them to make a judgement which would hold in the face of formal challenge. Frontier issues also required a fine judgement, but in circumstances where little was certain, and the challenge here focused on dealing with high levels of personal uncertainty. Indeed an individual issue might also involve a number of different elements. For example, when undertaking a competency procedure with a member of staff, the headteacher needed to: take expert advice from a human resources specialist; understand the relevant policy; analyse the situation to identify that the issue is one of competence; find a way to confirm that initial judgement; decide to begin the chosen process; prepare to manage the possible reactions of other staff and of pupils; prepare for the internal experience and emotional reaction of holding the necessary 'fierce conversations' (Coach S); and hold one's nerve as the process is worked through. These two analyses of the range and complexity of issues faced by the new headteachers indicate why they chose to access support beyond their main coach/mentor.

To support themselves in facing these issues the new headteachers drew on networks from the past, and created new networks for the future. Networks from the past included headteachers, deputy headteachers and other senior leaders with whom research participants had previously worked. Colleagues from the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) programme and longstanding contemporaries from previous schools were also consulted. All the research participants placed a high value on developing networks with new headteacher colleagues, and these networks for the future were usually based around existing or developing headteacher groups and relationships. Here they found it useful to talk with experienced colleagues, but also with those equally new to the role. Within and beyond these networks, specific roles consistently emerged:

- **The Buddy:** someone at about the same stage of experience in a similar role and who can share the emotional and practical experience of the journey from a common perspective.

- **The Mentor:** someone in a similar role but with more experience and so further along their leadership journey. The Mentor can provide a more objective perspective along with more reassurance, options and ideas than the Buddy.

- **The Expert:** someone who brings a specific expertise to meet the challenge of specific circumstances. The accountant, the HR specialist, the lawyer and the architect bring perhaps quite intensive support needed at a specific moment. Research participants also used experts from within their school to fill gaps in their knowledge, for example about Special Needs or post-sixteen provision.

- **The Partner, Friend** or **PA:** someone who brings a knowledge and insight about the person behind the role of headteacher, and thus can offer an alternative perspective in times of pressure.

Discussion and Conclusion

The headteachers in this study exercised agency in respect of coaching and mentoring relationships in four main ways. They quickly assessed the level of support available from the local authority, including the formal provision of coaching and mentoring. Some research participants also contributed to the choice of formal coach/mentor. They moderated the frequency and depth of their engagement with their formal coach/mentor. Lastly, they sought additional coach/mentoring support as they thought necessary. This article has reported the mainly on the fourth way in which the new headteachers exercised agency, focussing on the kinds of issues faced they faced and the kinds of support needed. It has also reported on how the new heads built a general and specific support team. Member checks with experienced coaches working within both private and public sectors endorsed this as good practice in preparation for a time when direct coach/mentoring support might not be available.

The model of coach/mentoring support for new secondary school headteachers for their first year in post proposed by Weindling and Earley (1987) is fundamentally a deficit model involving socialisation to the present rather than preparation for future challenges (Southworth, 1995). This research has identified three kinds of issue faced by new headteachers and has analysed the complex aspects of a single HR issue where support might be needed. The current (2012) provision of coach/mentor to new headteachers offers only 30 hours of support from an experienced headteacher over the first two years in post. It is unlikely that an individual offering 30 hours of support over two years could be flexible or experienced enough to meet all these needs. Therefore the expectation that new headteachers will need to look more widely for support is endorsed by this research and could be seen as vital in the current context.

The model reported by the participants in this study was a more extended and sustainable version, drawing on a wide range of expertise. Networks from the past and for the future provided significant general support, both pragmatic and psycho-social. The new headteachers also brought with them niche knowledge which they could make available to others in their network, and thus contribute as well as draw on a pool of expertise. Within their closer circle of support, specific roles were identified, including the Buddy, the Mentor, the Expert and the Partner or Friend.

There was a role for the formal coach/mentor in helping new headteachers identify appropriate sources of support both for the present and for a future when formal coach/mentoring would no longer be available. The formal coach also helped the new leaders to transmute their initial anxious self-questioning into the creative questioning of others that contributes to the growth of potential new leaders (Neal, 2011). Further the coach enabled the new leaders to configure issues from the complex, shifting and partial evidence accumulated during their first year in post. It was this configuration of the problem which enabled them subsequently to access appropriate support.

In taking a client perspective and a grounded theory approach to the question of how newly appointed secondary school headteachers use coaching and mentoring in their first year in post, this study offers a theory of how new headteachers use coaching/mentoring and provides a useful guide to both new headteachers and their coaches in negotiating the critical first months in post. Member checks with experienced coaches indicate that the findings may have resonance and application to new leaders and their coaches in other circumstances, including those working in the private sector.

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