



Research on peer coaching in preservice teacher education – A review of literature

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ABSTRACT

This study reviewed eight studies selected from the ERIC and Education Complete databases covering the years 1997 through 2007. The goals of this study were to identify similarities and differences of peer coaching and to examine its feasibility and challenges in preservice teacher education. The four similarities among the studies identified are (i) study participants, (ii) coaching relationships, (iii) coaching duration, and (iv) coaching strategies. The differences identified were in relation to the following four areas: (i) the purposes of peer coaching, (ii) the nature of the field-based experiences of the programmes, (iii) the training for peer coaching, and (iv) the effects of peer coaching. Peer coaching appears to possess unique advantages and have much value for preservice teacher education. How barriers to the comprehensive recognition of peer coaching could be eliminated in preservice teacher education is also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Peer coaching has a relatively brief history of less than 30 years since its debut in preservice teacher education (Englert & Sugai, 1983). Over the years, it has been one strategy espoused by a few teacher education programmes around the world to enhance the experiences and development of preservice teachers. Furthermore, it has been evidenced in literature as helpful in various aspects for field-based experiences. While well documented with positive aspects in developing future teachers, nonetheless, peer coaching is not seen an extensive acceptance in preservice teacher education. This lack of comprehensive recognition of peer coaching in preservice education deserves an in-depth exploration.

Peer coaching was initially adopted from inservice teacher professional development. Peer coaching, by definition, generally involves two colleagues engaged in a mutually supportive relationship (Neubert & McAllister, 1993). Peer coaching did not appear in teacher education until 1980 (Joyce & Showers, 1980, Joyce & Showers, 1983), when it was used as a follow-up to inservice professional development (Leggett & Hoyle, 1987). Inspired by the results that peer coaching brought to inservice professional development, researchers have adopted peer coaching in preservice teacher education since the early 1980s (Englert & Sugai, 1983) and have utilised the strategy in the field practicum for preservice

teachers (Lu, 2007, Lu, 2009; McAllister & Neubert, 1995; Morgan & Menlove, 1994).

Since its adoption in the preparation of preservice teachers, peer coaching has inspired a number of studies and likewise has ushered in a new energy to preservice teacher preparation. For example, a peer coaching project in Canada paired interns engaging in the supervision cycle in conjunction with the supervision provided by the cooperating teacher in two consecutive terms of a 16-week extended practicum (Pavelich, 1992). Although they were provided with guidelines of the supervision process, the interns were allowed to decide on their level of involvement in the process. The objective of this project was to provide interns with a form of peer support in the field, to augment instructional effectiveness, to give interns coaching experience that they could use with future colleagues in the school system, and to reduce the workload that was required of the cooperating teacher. The results indicated that participating interns perceived the process as generally effective and helpful. The eight cooperating teachers' reports varied; five who involved in the process actively considered it beneficial to interns, while three who participated in a passive level did not find it beneficial to themselves.

In another example, inspired by the effectiveness of peer coaching in inservice professional development, Neubert and McAllister (1993) were curious about its application in a preservice setting. Their study comprised elementary education students enrolled in a junior level curriculum and methods courses in Maryland, US. The programme involved the preservice students engaging with a variety of instructional strategies for one day on

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campus and practiced teaching in assigned classrooms for another. The students coached each other in the field after they received a training workshop that introduced them to a protocol of Praise–Question–Polish conferencing style, where peers started with praise of teaching aspects well done, then asked questions about practice and closed up with strengths and areas for future improvement.

Two other peer-coaching projects, with 21 and 24 students enrolled in respectively, were conducted with low-performance interns in a preservice Special Education programme in Utah, US (Morgan, Gustafson, Hudson, & Salzberg, 1992; Morgan, Menlove, Salzberg, & Hudson, 1994). In each project, five trainees with low performance were selected from the students. Deviating from other examples, these two peer-coaching projects used experienced undergraduates to coach the selected students, who received either course credit or paid tuition to conduct the peer coaching tasks.

There have been other studies which show beneficial results among student teachers. For example, some studies report that peer coaching enables student teachers to become active learners as both teachers and coaches of a fellow teacher (Goker, 2006; Weiss & Weiss, 1998). Others find that peer coaching facilitates collaboration and collegiality among student teachers (Benedetti & Reed, 1998; Neubert & Stover, 1994; Slater & Simmons, 2001; Weiss & Weiss, 1998). Still others contend that peer coaching has generated structured professional conversations between student teachers (Arnau, Kahrs, & Kruskamp, 2004; Benedetti & Reed, 1998; Jenkins, Hamrick, & Todorovich, 2002; Neubert & McAllister, 1993; Neubert & Stover, 1994; Weiss & Weiss, 1998). These findings attest to the advantages that preservice teacher preparation programmes would aim to achieve for the programme performance.

This study examined the scholarship aspect of peer coaching in preservice teacher education over the year 1997 through 2007. The selection of studies examined for this review was conducted using the ERIC and Education Complete databases. Eight studies from the United States and New Zealand were selected utilising the following criteria: i) Did the study focus on preservice field experience? ii) Was peer coaching the object of the study? iii) Did the study have an empirically persuasive methodology? iv) Did the studies relate diverse structures and outcomes? The primary goal of this synthesis and analysis was to identify similarities and differences of peer coaching in the studies reviewed. This review also examined the feasibility and challenges of peer coaching in preservice teacher preparation.

2. Commonalities in peer-coaching studies

The rationale of identifying common features among the studies was to obtain a sense of the inherent applicability and value of peer coaching to preservice teacher education. The analysis indicated that, although the studies had unique foci, they appeared to have several similarities relating to (i) study participants; (ii) coaching relationships; (iii) coaching duration; and (iv) coaching strategies.

2.1. Study participants

The findings in the eight studies reviewed indicated that student teachers were the only substantial participants, which is consistent with the study of Neubert and McAllister (1993). Insignificant exceptions appeared in two studies. In Hasbrouck's study (1997), seven consulting teachers were involved in informal interviews; Mallette, Mabeady, and Harper (1999) included three pupils with special learning needs as passive participants who responded to the student teachers' teaching. Although there is a legitimate argument that the focus of a study determines and delimits the participant, the fact that the overwhelming majority of the studies reviewed

were limited to student teachers as participants is a cause for concern. Since cooperating teachers and university supervisors complete the triad in the student teaching experience, their voice is very important in getting a deeper understanding of the process. Excluding the perceptions and experiences of such key players undermines these studies of a more complete and complex picture of the practicum process. The clear implication from these studies is that future research should have a broader scope to include other stakeholders as participants.

Further examination reveals two noteworthy characteristics of the participants in the selected studies. First, all participants were from current cohorts of student teachers. This implies that all the studies were short-term research projects and that the results did not represent any long-term effects of peer coaching. Second, the number of participants was limited, ranging from 3 to 32 student teachers, which implied that the projects in general were in a small scale. These findings suggest that future studies should provide findings on the effects of the strategy overtime as well as a larger number base for generalization.

2.2. Coaching relationships

Unlike the studies of Morgan et al. (1992) and Morgan et al. (1994) that used experienced undergraduates as coaches, all the studies reviewed involved only peers. The relational structure of peer coaching is perhaps the core of this strategy since the outcomes rely heavily on mutual respect and trust. In a comprehensive literature review, Ackland (1991) found two types of coaching that involve peers in different working relationships: *expert coaching* and *reciprocal coaching*. While expert coaching occurs when teachers with more advanced expertise provide assistance to other teachers, reciprocal coaching refers to peers with similar experience and knowledge mentoring each other. The scholarship on peer coaching seems to present an incomplete picture on the subject as the studies reviewed indicate that peer-coaching relationship in preservice teacher education is predominantly reciprocal. Even though in a couple of the studies participants reported peers being less effective than university supervisors or classroom teachers (Kurtts & Levin, 2000) and lacking in coaching skills (Kurtts & Levin, 2000; Ovens, 2004); it was evident that overall student teachers collaborated and supported each other through the field experiences. This mutually supportive relationship minimized the feeling that one person is dominating the other.

2.3. Coaching durations

The review indicated that peer-coaching durations coincided with those of the teacher education programmes studied, ranging from four weeks to an entire semester. Generally, peer coaching commences around the time student teachers begin their field experiences. This practice is supported by researchers who argue that once student teachers are in the field, the earlier peer coaching begins, the better (Benedetti & Reed, 1998). Another researcher, Feiman-Nemser (2001), also emphasized that peer coaching encourages serious conversations about teaching that are valuable resources for developing and improving student teachers' practices. The idea is that student teachers can begin this journey by establishing a collaborative and supportive tone through peer coaching from the onset of the practicum.

2.4. Coaching strategies

Peer coaching in student teaching is designed to ensure that this experience enhances prospective teachers' ability to analyse and reflect on their practice and is ensured not to be a random activity.

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