Promoting the Reflective Teacher through Peer Coaching to Improve Teaching Skills

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Abstract

Effective reflection is an important component of quality teaching. A teacher who can reflect on their own practices to find better ways of teaching is a reflective teacher. Such a teacher, who regularly considers their own practices, is more likely to develop and improve their professional learning. This study used peer coaching to help support and promote reflective teaching, for the improvement of teaching skills through a powerful professional learning community. The design of this study comprised three phases: 1) conceptual change 2) practice in becoming a reflective teacher and enabling teachers to coach each other (there are obvious benefits to colleagues collaborating and sharing ideas, thoughts and observations) and 3) assessing and reflecting on teaching skills. The participants were grade 5-6 teachers in the Phetchaburi province of Thailand. A mixed methods research framework was used to collect and analyse data. Data source triangulation was used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. The findings indicate that peer coaching enriches teachers’ personal reflections on their practices, provides teachers with suggestions from peers on how to refine their practices and fosters a community of teachers who are intent on improving and invigorating their teaching skills.

1. Introduction

Modern education reform began in Thailand with the 1999 National Education Act, which was Thailand’s first education reform legislation. The initial period of reform was characterized by structural adjustment, some rearrangements of funding and the consolidation of education administration. Currently, Thailand is in its second decade of education reform, according to a framework comprising four main principles: 1) quality education for, and development of, young Thais; 2) quality development of a new generation of Thai teachers; 3) revitalization of educational institutions and resources and 4) revitalization of education administration and management. The main goal in the last two decades of education reform has been the move towards student-centered learning. This is instilled into learners through the development of skills deemed essential to prospering in 21st century society, such as citizenship, global literacy and enthusiasm for lifelong learning, creativity and higher-order thinking. One way of...
achieving successful education reform is through the systemic reform of the teaching profession. Professional teachers, who constantly develop themselves as well as teaching others, will be capable of providing quality learning to learners.

Reflective teaching is effective for professional teacher development in that it encourages the teacher to look at ways of managing the classroom and children from differing perspectives, based on assessment data. Schön (1996) defined reflective teaching as the concept of a reflective practice that involves thoughtfully considering one’s own experiences in applying knowledge to practice. Teachers who always reflect on their teaching will receive information directly from self-assessment of their actual practice. The teacher who is critical in their thinking about what happens in classroom lessons and about alternative means of achieving goals or aims is a reflective teacher. Practicing to become a reflective teacher may be achieved via a variety of models but peer coaching tends to be used in many fields. Peer coaching is a process that involves colleagues collaborating and sharing ideas, thoughts and observations. This aims to promote self-assessment and collaboration for better teaching and, ultimately, better learning.

In Thailand, peer coaching has seldom been used; most coaching takes the form of cognitive coaching by a supervisor. There is also greater focus on summative assessment than formative assessment and, therefore, assessment data is used to make decisions rather than for promoting development or improvement. Many teachers have never received any beneficial assessment data for improving themselves. Moreover, they do not have the opportunity to reflect and share ideas about their teaching. This research aims to promote the reflective teacher through peer coaching. This is not only to support professional development but also to encourage the utilisation of formative assessment data.

2. Methodology

This research was designed to determine the effectiveness of peer coaching in promoting the reflective teacher. The concept of an empowered professional learning community was applied to the procedures employed and a mixed methodology design was selected to gain more comprehensive data. The quantitative research method comprised data collection from a large sample of teachers in order to evaluate their reflective practices. The qualitative research method focused on the reflectiveness of school culture and the teachers’ beliefs and detailed reflective practices.

2.1 Participants

We selected primary schools under the municipality office of Phetchaburi province of Thailand as the location for this study. The selection criteria were based on school size, principal’s leadership and the enthusiasm of teachers towards professional development. Ten teachers of grades 5-6 were trained and encouraged to be reflective teachers. Their average age was 47 years old, with an average teaching experience of 20 years.

2.2 Research procedure
Figure 1 below illustrates the three phases of the research procedure used for this research.

The three phases of the research procedure, as illustrated in figure 1, are presented below.

Phase 1: Conceptual change

The purposes of conceptual change are focused around the development of an awareness of positive attitudes and positive perceptions, such as open-mindedness and responsibility; discussions and sharing of best practices; the encouragement of collaborative work cultures in schools and examples of case studies of effective changes in teaching that improved student learning and achievement.

Phase 2: Practice to become a reflective teacher

The practice of becoming a reflective teacher and enabling teachers to coach each other is a cycle of self-reflective practice; reflective peer coaching practice and sharing learning and experience. This is divided into four stages as follows:

Stage 1: Learn basic concepts related to reflection

The aim is to promote reflective thinking and a reflective character among the teachers. The teachers were assigned to learn the basic concepts related to reflection in a reflective teaching manual by means of self-study in order to acquire knowledge and understanding of the act of reflection.

Stage 2: Reflective learning

To make the learning more effective, after learning the basic concepts related to reflection, the teachers were asked to reflect on how they learnt. Reflection on learning is an important means to improving teachers’ understanding of what and how they learn so that they can adopt better methods in future practice. There are four types of reflective learning question: 1) Observing the answers to questions such as, what is it you already know? What caught your attention? What do you now know? 2) Making sense of and understanding questions such as, can you give an example of what you have learnt? 3) Working with meaningful questions such as, can you apply your new learning in some way? How? 4) Transformative learning questions such as, how do you consider the learning of the basic concepts of reflection as significant in your professional development?
Stage 3: Reflective practice

Reflective practice was separated into two forms of observation and reflection of a teacher’s performance in teaching, namely self-observation and peer-observation. For self-observation, the teachers were introduced to using the four modes of reflection to observe their practices. These are reflection-to-teaching, reflection-in-teaching, reflection-on-teaching and reflection-for-teaching and are based on the concept of self-reflective practice. For peer-observation, the teachers were provided with the opportunity of viewing each other’s different styles of teaching and the opportunity for reflection on their own teaching in addition to that of their colleagues. The concept of reflective peer coaching was cited and three steps were practiced: 1) two teachers met to provide the baseline student data and to make an observation agreement; 2) each participant both observed and was observed. Teachers would work in pairs and take turns in observing each other’s classes. One taught a lesson and one served in the role of observer and coach. The coach was not involved in teaching the lesson or in interacting with the students or teacher in any way. The role was only to observe and record observable behaviours and actions; 3) the pair of teachers met to discuss the observed lesson as soon as possible after the observation. The coach was required not to evaluate the lesson but to help their partner become more reflective about their teaching by asking questions, providing data and facilitating their partner’s own evaluation of the lesson. There were five kinds of questions: open questions, closed questions, specific questions, reflective questions and hypothetical questions.

Stage 4: Sharing learning and experience to improve student learning and achievement

We divided teachers into two groups: a grade-level teaching group and a subject-level teaching group. Each group held meetings to share learning and experience with the aim of improving student learning and achievement. This stage was conducted on the basis of the formulation of the professional learning community proposed by Kruse, Louis and Bryn (1995). A professional learning community is comprised of three aspects: 1) its characteristics, consisting of reflective dialogues that focus on teaching behaviours and learning outcomes, a collective focus on student learning, the derivation of a practice that involves interactions among teachers to share ideas, learn from one another and help each other, collaboration through a learning environment to share instruction strategies and techniques and the shared values and norms that the members of the group have reached agreement on and which shape their behaviour as professionals; 2) its structural conditions, consisting of providing adequate time to meet and discuss, physical proximity in which teachers can observe and interact with their peers, an interdependent teaching role for teacher empowerment and the freedom to do what they believe to be the best for their students, regularly established meetings and the employment of team teaching to practice together and 3) its human/social resources, consisting of support for teachers who are open to improvement and who trust and respect the ability of all members of team, supportive leadership, processes for socializing teachers into a collegial school culture and opportunities for acquiring new knowledge and skills. Stages 3 and 4 were repeated to create a cycle of reflective practice towards becoming a reflective teacher. Each teacher underwent two cycles of reflective practice during the semester.
Phase 3: Assessment and reflection of teaching skills

This phase was conducted after the process of being a reflective teacher was completed. Self-assessment and self-reflection were used to access teaching skills. This comprised the following three aspects:

Instructional skills: A competent level of knowledge and skill in designing and employing instructional experience learning, especially child-centered learning.

Classroom management and problem solving skills: A competent level of knowledge and skills in organizing the physical and human elements within a classroom, including the ability to analyze and solve problems.

Assessment and reflective skills: A competent level of knowledge and skill in classroom assessment and reflective teaching and the use of reflective assessment data.

2.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The aim of the data collection and its subsequent analysis was to gain an insight into the shifts in attitude and changing practices in relation to learning and transference peer coaching skills and reflection skills for improving teaching skills and student learning. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used in the collection of data and a mixed methodology was applied to increase triangulation and the validity of the results. The data collection consisted of principal interviews, teacher group interviews, teacher surveys, school observations and teaching practice observations. Data analysis was conducted continually throughout the period of promoting reflective teaching. The data obtained from the surveys, interviews, observations and document analysis were constantly compared, contrasted and triangulated using both deductive and inductive approaches before any conclusions were drawn.

3. Findings

The findings from this research are presented in two parts: first, the teachers’ conceptual change and second, the practice of becoming a reflective teacher. These are provided below.

3.1 Teachers’ conceptual change

The data analysis of group interviews, in terms of the change in the teachers’ conceptions and perspective, were sufficient after the promotion of reflection. The teachers displayed an understanding of the shift from teachers’ teaching to students’ learning, gained insights into examples of applying this in a learning-oriented environment and acquired strategies to enhance student learning and achievement. Examples of statements of teaching and learning beliefs for before and after the teachers’ conceptual changes are shown in Table 1.
Table 1 Example statements of teaching and learning beliefs

| Pre-Teachers’ Conceptual Change | Post-Teachers’ Conceptual Change |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| - Teaching and learning has not as yet reached the goal desired because of the student, not the teacher | - The teacher is significant enough in having a positive effect in the student learning process to enhance student leaning and achievement. |
| - Student-centred learning or learning-oriented teaching is difficult to apply in the classroom | - Learning occurs best when students are personally engaged in the learning process and perceive the learning focus to be relevant or of interest to themselves and their lives. |
| - The high scores achieved in the National Test (NT) are the result of tutorials, not teaching and learning in the classroom | - The effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom can improve student achievement and enhance National Test (NT) scores. |

3.2 The practice of becoming a reflective teacher

This result focuses on the first cycle of reflective practice towards becoming a reflective teacher. The main data used to explain this was obtained from questionnaires and additional data was gathered from teacher interviews and teaching practice observations. The results are divided into two parts as follows:

3.2.1 Self-reflective practice

After learning the basic concepts relating to reflection, and reflecting on that learning, the teachers started to become reflective teachers through reflective practice. The first stage in reflective practice is self-reflective practice. The data was analyzed for the teachers’ practice of all four kinds of reflection: the kind practiced by all teachers was reflection-on-action. Some teachers practiced reflection-in-action (70%), reflection-for-action (50%) and reflection-to-action (20%). This was the same when considered by grade level. Table 2 presents examples of teachers’ behavior in each kind of reflection, drawn from teacher interviews and teacher observations. Each example of behavior has been selected to illustrate each of the four kinds of reflection identified.

Table 2. Kind of reflection and teachers’ behavior

| Kind of Reflection | Grade 5 Teachers | Grade 6 Teachers | Total | Teachers’ Behaviour |
|--------------------|------------------|------------------|-------|---------------------|
|                    | N (%)            | N (%)            | N (%) |                     |
| Reflection-to-action | 1 (20)          | 1 (20)           | 2 (20) | - Recheck the appropriateness of instruction strategies, activities, material and assessment after lesson plan. |
| Reflection-in-action | 3 (60)          | 4 (80)           | 7 (70) | - Use simple questions to analyse problems when the student doesn’t understand the lesson - Aware of the classroom environment constantly when teaching |
| Reflection-on-action | 5 (100)         | 5 (100)          | 10 (100) | - Assess the effectiveness of teaching and student learning after teaching - Write the results of the lesson at the bottom of the lesson plan |
| Reflection-for-action | 2 (40)          | 3 (60)           | 5 (50) | - Get feedback and try to improve their teaching. - Seek out opportunities to talk about teaching with others - Learn new means of instruction or innovation and apply to lessons |
Table 3 presents the framework that teachers used for self-reflective practice. It can be concluded that all teachers’ reflective practice was conducted according to the following descriptions, eight teachers (80%) were reflective by evaluation and analysis, five teachers (50%) were reflective by feeling and action plan and four teachers (40%) were reflective by conclusion. Examples of teachers’ statement in each kind of reflection can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Framework of reflection and teachers’ statements

| Framework of reflection | Grade 5 Teachers | Grade 6 Teachers | Total | Teachers’ Statement |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------|--------------------|
|                         | N (%)            | N (%)            | N (%) |                    |
| Description             | 5 (100)          | 5 (100)          | 10 (100) | Students used a candle to write new words on paper and put it in the water. They were very excited when the new word appeared slowly. |
| Feeling                 | 2 (40)           | 3 (60)           | 5 (50) | Although they were wet in every way, I think my new activity worked very well. |
| Evaluation              | 4 (80)           | 4 (80)           | 8 (80) | Students have in-depth understanding of the new words. |
| Analysis                | 4 (80)           | 4 (80)           | 8 (80) | I suppose the main reason the lesson was successful was because of the new activities. They enjoyed it. It also made them apply their learning. |
| Conclusion              | 2 (40)           | 2 (40)           | 4 (80) | Next time I will be more careful if my activity uses water or something else that may cause damage. Students learn more when they enjoy learning. |
| Action plan             | 2 (40)           | 3 (60)           | 5 (50) | I will have to use that lesson plan again next year. |

3.2.2 Reflective peer coaching practicing

We divided the teachers into two groups for reflective peer coaching practice: a subject-level teaching group and a grade-level teaching group. In the course of a semester, teachers in each group were instructed to observe colleagues’ teaching and to coach them at least twice. In the first session of observation and coaching, most teachers thought that they were learning new methods of instruction from observing their colleagues and were gaining ideas from their colleagues’ feedback, to a high degree. They listened and validated colleagues’ practices according to their expertise, asked colleagues to share their insights after the observation and could apply new instruction and ideas to future practice to a moderate degree. They gave adequate time to meetings with colleagues, used a collaborative problem solving style and summarised and restated important points to colleagues to a low degree, as show in Table 3 below.

Table 4. Opinion level of reflective peer coaching practice

| Reflective peer coaching practice | Opinion Level |
|----------------------------------|---------------|
|                                  | High | Moderate | Low |
|                                  | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) |
| 1. Gave adequate time to meeting with colleagues | - | 2 (20) | 8 (80) |
| 2. Used a collaborative problem solving style | - | 4 (40) | 6 (60) |
| 3. Listened and validated colleagues’ practices according to expertise | - | 7 (70) | 3 (30) |
| 4. Asked colleagues to share their insights after the observation | - | 6 (60) | 2 (20) |
| 5. Summarised and restated the important points to colleagues | 2 (20) | 4 (50) | 6 (60) |
| 6. Learned new instruction from observing colleague | 8 (80) | 2 (20) | - |
| 7. Gained ideas from colleagues’ feedback | 5 (50) | 3 (30) | 2 (20) |
| 8. Could apply new instruction and ideas for the future | - | 10 (100) | - |

4. Conclusions

The findings indicate that self-reflective practice and reflective peer coaching practice can help teachers to better understand themselves and their students in order to make learning more meaningful. They became more focused on improving student outcomes and developing effective practices. They have an increased understanding of the
importance of reflective teaching and the benefits of collegial support. However, there was little evidence of the application of the reflective practice for the improvement of teaching skills from this session. The sharing of learning and experience did not occur. This is chiefly because of the lack of time. Scheduling time for opportunities to learn and share was difficult, especially with other school-related activities. Unfortunately, in this study, peer coaching evidently didn’t help teachers to develop as reflective teachers, to learn to transfer new skills to the classroom or to encourage peer support and feedback. This is due to the teachers having less effective partners, or to their own nervousness, or a self-awareness of their lack of professional knowledge when offering constructive feedback. As a result, they were less likely to work towards an evidence-based inquiry approach and they lacked the ability to reflect on their practice. The findings of this research suggest that we should be working to increase the effectiveness of peer coaching by focusing on coaching competencies and peer coaching. Future study will help us to enable peer coaching to be effective in improving the teachers’ teaching skills.

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