

Book Review

Coaching and mentoring: exploring approaches to professional learning

Christine Forde and Jim O'Brien (eds)

Edinburgh: Dunedin Press (2011) pp. 90 Pbk. £16.50

ISBN 9781906716295.

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This slim volume presents a timely critical appraisal of approaches to CPD for teaching staff in Scotland, bringing together an overview of current research, and focusing, in particular, on the role of coaching and mentoring. It is a recent addition to the Policy and Practice in Education Series.

Coaching and mentoring are widely recognised as effective forms of staff development. To assess the potential of these, the authors initially review research into the effectiveness of other current methods of CPD, many of which are seen to be 'passive, episodic...and not rigorously evaluated' (p. 15). They conclude that there is much room for improvement. Experiential learning where staff are exposed to a variety of opportunities and within schools which are collaborative communities is the central theme of the book.

There are some examples of experiential learning already in Scottish schools, not just individual learning activities, but also peer-supported learning and professional learning communities where the focus is on teachers learning from each other.

The authors make a case for improving the existing mentoring scheme for new teachers by suggesting that mentors become more like change agents. In this wider concept, new teachers are also part of a more collaborative process, in which they draw in a systematic way from the expertise and experience of a number of staff.

In another sphere, coaching is an element in senior staff development programmes. However, the authors believe that these courses can be enhanced by incorporating a blend of coaching, mentoring and tutoring to provide an even richer experience in head teacher training than at present.

Professional learning communities are also evaluated. In this model, the concept of leadership within the school is widened so that leadership is demonstrated at different levels and in different contexts, while school leaders retain authority for the direction of the school. This chapter of the book is a thorough guide to any school looking to implement such an approach.

The authors are not afraid to tackle some of the more contentious aspects of any discussion of experiential approaches to teacher learning. For example, the conformity and stifling of fresh ideas that might possibly arise out of a mentoring scheme; the importance of the balance between personal and professional development in any intervention focusing on individualized learning; the concern over coaching straying into the realms of counselling and the issue of cost-effectiveness of approaches that are too learner-centred in the current climate.

In summary, the authors take the view that at every stage in a teacher's career, no single pedagogy is sufficient in itself to support teachers' learning. They recommend development that draws from the experience of a range of learning opportunities and that is contained within 'coherent, relevant, meaningful and rewarding programmes' (p. 89).

Education in the North Volume 19 (2012) Book Reviews, <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/eitn>

This book is very valuable and thought-provoking reading and can be a useful guide in incorporating coaching and mentoring to support a richer learning experience for all staff in schools.