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## **Peer coaching in a school in Cairo, Egypt: Implementation, barriers, and pathways to effective adoption**

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Peer coaching in a school in Cairo, Egypt: Implementation, barriers, and pathways to effective adoption

### **Structured Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the article is to examine how peer coaching was introduced in one school in Egypt and to identify barriers and opportunities for successful implementation.

**Design/Methodology:** The methodology included semi-structured interviews with eight teachers, participant observation of their classes and meetings, and three focus group meetings with teachers and school administrators.

**Findings:** Ladyshewsky's (2017) five key aspects of peer coaching are considered in the findings: establishing peer partners, building trust between the partners, identifying specific areas to target for learning, training on non-evaluative questions and feedback, and supporting each other as new ideas are attempted. Each aspect of these is reviewed in light of the implementation process in the school.

**Practical Implications:** The study provides practical suggestions for teachers and school administrators that include considerations for implementation. Numerous connections are made to research on peer coaching that is relevant to the implementation of peer coaching in schools in Egypt and other countries in the Global South.

**Originality/Value:** The study provides an examination of the implementation of peer coaching in a school in Egypt. Thus, it contributes to the limited literature on peer coaching in the Global South. The discussion and conclusion sections consider further questions and research opportunities for effective practices in peer coaching in international contexts.

**Keywords:** mentoring and coaching in educational contexts for secondary education;  
international and intercultural education; mentoring in education

**Article Type:** Research Paper

Peer coaching in teaching is considered an effective method for improving student learning by supporting teachers through a collaborative and reciprocal process of reflecting on, and improving, teaching practice (Charteris and Smardon, 2014). Peer coaching typically involves two teachers agreeing to identify areas of focused attention, observing each other's teaching practices, sharing ideas for effective teaching, and reflecting together on the process. A key conceptual premise is that teachers can learn from the feedback of their peers in a non-evaluative partnership (Kohler *et al.*, 1997).

Although there has been significant research on peer coaching in North America (e.g., Hargreaves and Dawe 1990; Robbins, 2015) and Europe (e.g., Geeraerts *et al.*, 2015), much less research has been completed in the Global South, particularly Latin America and Africa. This article offers an examination of how a peer coaching initiative was established in a private elementary and secondary school in Cairo, Egypt. The key research questions were “How does a school in Egypt implement a peer coaching model of professional development, and what are the resulting lessons for effective implementation?” The research addressed an important gap in the literature by considering how peer coaching is implemented in a non-Western context. It also identified the barriers that were experienced when implementing the program as well as effective practices that supported the implementation of peer coaching. As a result, the study's significance is in its contextual focus in Egypt and in highlighting “lessons learned” from implementing peer coaching in a non-Western context. Ladyshewsky's (2017) identification of key aspects of peer coaching were used as a framework for considering its implementation in the Egyptian school. Although other conceptual frameworks could have been used, (e.g., Bell and Kozlowski, 2010; Poekert, 2010), Ladyshewsky's work examines peer coaching from an interdisciplinary perspective, thus providing a suitable model for considering peer coaching in a

setting in Egypt. The article also provides an opportunity to consider how peer coaching might be implemented in similar schools in international contexts. The conclusion considers further questions and research opportunities for examining effective practices in peer coaching in global contexts.

## **Literature Review**

### **Peer Coaching**

Peer coaching is a form of professional development where teachers learn from, and support, other teachers (Yee, 2016). This collaborative process enables teachers to solve problems together, engage in dialogue about classroom practices, and build leadership capacity (Charteris and Smardon, 2014). The goal of peer coaching is to improve teaching practices to positively affect student learning outcomes (Murray *et al.*, 2009). Teachers are often interested in engaging in professional learning if they see that it leads to improved student learning. However, research on the effectiveness of peer coaching in influencing student learning outcomes is mixed. Some have suggested that there is limited or no influence on student learning outcomes (Murray *et al.*, 2009), while others have indicated that peer coaching positively influences student learning outcomes (Kohler *et al.*, 1997). What is clear is that teachers recognize benefits from peer coaching, including how it serves as an empowering experience due to the non-hierarchical relationships which exist between peers (Netolicky, 2016).

Studies have indicated that peer coaching is more effective than traditional professional development workshops in engaging teachers in learning (Joyce and Calhoun, 2010). Peer coaching meets teachers' needs for authentic and embedded teacher professional learning (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). When teachers understand the benefits of peer coaching, they demonstrate a positive attitude to engaging in it as a form of professional development (Zwart *et*

*al.*, 2009). Peer coaching can also help participants identify key assumptions and beliefs about their teaching and leadership practices (Houchens *et al.*, 2017).

Peer coaching is sometimes referred to as reciprocal coaching, thus differentiating it from instructional coaching where a subject or pedagogical expert provides input and direction to novice teachers (Desimone and Pak, 2017). The reciprocal nature of peer coaching is supported through the non-evaluative feedback that peers provide to each other (Ladyshevsky, 2017). Accountability and trusting relationships are key aspects in peer coaching (Houchens *et al.*, 2017). Netolicky (2016) described peer coaching as an “empowering and identity-shaping experience. Coaching can incite non-linear growth and result in unexpected impacts; it requires a trust-based non-judgmental coach–coachee relationship” (p. 77). Peer coaching is a collaborative process that aims to reduce isolation that some teachers experience (Yee, 2016). Teachers respond positively to the support provided, especially when they are able to plan together with other coaches (Greene, 2004).

Peer coaching helps build new teaching skills and supports communication skills for teachers (Yee, 2016). It can also help teachers build leadership capacity (Charteris and Smardon, 2014). Leadership skills such as communication, relationship-building, and decision-making strategies can all be honed through peer coaching (Barnett *et al.*, 2017). How it achieves these aspects can vary (Robbins, 2015), for example, the use of video review to supplement the type of feedback that peers provide to each other (Charteris and Smardon, 2013). Journals and blogs are effective formats by which to engage in the reflective aspect of peer coaching (Ladyshevsky and Gardner, 2008). It is important to note that, despite how it is implemented, there are potential barriers to effective peer coaching such as limited institutional commitment and individual concerns about interpersonal communication and trust (Ladyshevsky, 2017).

This study drew significantly on the work of Ladyshevsky who, in 2017, outlined key aspects of peer coaching. According to Ladyshevsky (2017), the five key aspects are establishing peer partners, building trust between the partners, identifying specific areas to target for learning, training on non-evaluative questions and feedback, and supporting each other as new ideas are attempted. First, Ladyshevsky indicated that when establishing peer partners, it is important that a peer with whom they would like to work be selected as opposed to being assigned. Second, Ladyshevsky suggested that building trust starts with discussions about disclosure and confidentiality. Since the individuals involved may not have extensive knowledge of the partner, establishing these ground rules helps foster trusting relationships. Third, trust is further established when the partners identify areas of growth, such as issues they are struggling with or an area in which they want to learn or improve. Fourth, Ladyshevsky emphasized the importance of asking non-evaluative questions instead of giving direction or providing advice. Asking non-evaluative questions helps with the fifth key aspect of Ladyshevsky's model: supporting each other through the process. Ladyshevsky's model provided a suitable framework for the study because the five elements incorporate a potential set of universal guidelines for peer coaching implementation.

### **Peer Coaching in the Global South**

A significant number of research studies have examined peer coaching in Western contexts (e.g., Charteris and Smardon, 2014; Theeboom *et al.*, 2014). Despite this, there has been limited examination of peer coaching in international contexts (Zepeda *et al.*, 2013). There is growing interest globally in peer coaching because of its potential to support teacher quality and thus improve student learning outcomes (Netolicky, 2016). Zepeda *et al.* (2013) examined peer coaching from an international and comparative perspective. They explored the adoption and

applicability of peer coaching amongst teachers in Turkey and the United States and found that American teachers had a higher belief in the applicability of peer coaching. However, there was no examination of the implementation process or identified barriers or pathways to effective implementation.

This study was completed in Egypt where there is a desire to improve teaching practices in schools (Abdelrahman and Irby, 2016). Although there has been a significant increase in funding for public schools, there are still major problems in Egyptian schools, including poorly qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, rigid governmental control, lack of critical thinking, lack of vocational training, and gender inequality in educational attainment (Galal, 2002; Loveluck, 2012). In a recent study by El-Bilawi and Nasser (2017), teachers in Egypt were found to be critical of traditional professional development efforts. Teachers were unhappy with the quality and duration of professional development opportunities, the lack of support and follow up from the administration related to these professional learning activities, and the lack of practical examples provided (El-Bilawi and Nasser, 2017). Peer coaching ensures ongoing, responsive, supportive, and authentic professional development and may provide a means to address the concerns raised by teachers in Egypt. As a result, it has great potential for embedded and authentic teacher professional development in Egypt (El-Bilawi and Nasser, 2017).

Consideration of how peer coaching might support the development of education in Egypt provides a significant rationale for the importance of the study. By doing so, this also contributes to the few studies of peer coaching in international contexts and provides an important opportunity to consider the implementation of peer coaching in a school in Egypt.

### **Conceptual Framework**



The study drew on two key theoretical concepts: experiential learning and teacher agency and change. These informed our understanding of peer coaching as an active form of professional learning as well as how teachers' beliefs are fostered and altered. They are key aspects that underpin the rationale for engaging in peer coaching as a form of teacher professional development.

Experiential learning principles support the idea that individuals engage in practice, reflect on their experiences, consider options and opportunities to extend their experiences, and then apply this learning in new contexts (Kolb, 1984). Similarly, peer coaching is founded on the premise of reflection informing practice. Teachers engage in the process of peer coaching as co-learners, thus co-constructing knowledge in and through the process (Charteris and Smardon, 2014). Ladyshewsky (2017) suggested, "This approach is modelled on experiential learning principles which requires that individuals reflect on their experience, make conclusions about the experience, and then re-apply this learning to build performance" (p. 8). Thus, peer coaching is an experiential form of professional learning which involves active engagement in the process of learning, reflection on the learning, and developing new ideas and practices to further employ.

Student learning and school improvement is enhanced through authentic professional development for teachers (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). Guskey (2002) provided three goals of professional development activities: changes in classroom practice, changes in teacher beliefs and attitudes, and changes in student learning outcomes. Professional development activities are sometimes ineffective because they do not provide opportunity for job-embedded, long-term, and supportive activities (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). At a deeper level, these challenges are related to the concept of teacher agency, the level to which teachers contribute to their work without external pressures or requirements (Biesta *et al.*, 2015). The concept of agency as

capacity and competency also incorporates the concept of an active engagement process (Guskey, 2002). Thus, teacher professional growth occurs when there are opportunities for critical reflection upon significant professional experiences (Breyfogle, 2005; Llinares and Krainer, 2006). Again, peer coaching addresses the idea of actively contributing to teacher agency by providing teachers with the tools and opportunities for developing their teaching competencies.

### **Methodology**

The research questions at the core of this study were:

1. How does a school in Egypt implement a peer coaching model of professional development?
2. What are the resulting lessons for effective implementation in other school contexts?

These questions were operationalized through a qualitative research method approach. Merriam (1998) indicated, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 3). The study considered the experiences of teachers who were engaged in peer coaching to inform the process of implementation. Thus, “the interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19).

### **Setting**

The school is a private school with 1,000 students from kindergarten to Grade 12 in Cairo. Although it uses an international curriculum, taught in the English language, almost all of the students and staff are Egyptian nationals. The student population is affluent, and most

teachers have advanced degrees. There are approximately 200 teachers and assistants, and the administrative team consists of a director, associate director, and four vice-principals. All information that could identify the school and individuals within it have been changed.

Eight teachers volunteered to participate in the study, with two representing each of the four divisions of the school (kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary). These eight participants were selected from those who expressed interest and based on purposeful sampling to ensure representation of gender and years of teaching experience (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The author was a full participant in the process, contributing to both the conversations and classroom visits. In this way, the participants and author were “coequals who [were] carrying on a conversation about mutually relevant issues” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 634).

### **Data Sets and Procedures**

Multiple sources of data were accessed over an eight-month period (October 2017 to May 2018) including the use of semi-structured interviews with eight teachers, participant observation of the peer coaches in their classes and meetings, and three focus groups with participating teachers and school administrators. Data collection methods included recording interviews and taking field notes in focus groups and when observing teachers in their classes and meetings with peers. Question prompts included “How did you choose your peer coach?” “What was important to you in the process of selecting a peer coach?” “Could you describe the conversations and tasks that you and your peer coach have engaged in?” “Why did you choose the specific area of teaching focus?”

Three focus groups were held with the participating peer coaches and the administrators of the school. These included one focus group with those involved in the kindergarten and elementary division programs, another with the middle school program, and a final one with a

focus on the secondary school. Question prompts included “Could you tell me more about how peer coaching has been implemented in this division?” “What professional development activities have supported the implementation of peer coaching?” “What have been some of the obstacles or barriers you have experienced in the implementation?” “What have been some of the benefits that you have perceived?” Focus groups meetings were not recorded, but field notes were maintained by the author. The themes that emerged from the focus groups were shared with the participants in each focus group at the conclusion of the focus group as a form of member checking (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011).

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Field notes and transcripts were analyzed using a keyword approach that identified frequently used words and phrases. Analysis was completed in two steps: First, keywords from the academic literature on peer coaching (e.g., trust, peers, reciprocity, support) were identified, and the transcripts were then examined to identify the frequency and the context of the words. Second, words that commonly appeared in the transcripts were identified, grouped, and categorized. A dual design, hybrid process (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), using aspects of both inductive and deductive data analysis, led to the identification of keywords that were clustered to identify overarching themes reflective of the implementation process and identification of barriers and opportunities for successful implementation (Merriam, 1998). This method, using constant-comparative procedures (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), supported the qualitative research design of the study and ensured that the themes were validated on an ongoing basis. Thus, validity of results was supported through triangulation of data through multiple forms of questioning, debriefing sessions, and member checking (Shenton, 2004).

### **Findings**

In the following section, the findings of the study are presented in relation to the implementation process of peer coaching and to the identified barriers and pathways to effective adoption.

### **Process of Implementation**

The administrative team chose to implement peer coaching within the four divisions of the school: kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and secondary school. Teachers selected peers within their division with whom they would be paired. Administrators provided some guidance but did not determine whom teachers would be paired with. For example, a new teacher in the middle school was encouraged to partner with an experienced teacher to help him with his classroom management skills. However, for the most part, teachers chose their peer. When asked why they chose the peer teacher, participants indicated that it was due to the respect they had for the other teacher, the area of focus that they wanted to concentrate on, or because they felt the peer teacher had insight that would help them. For example, one teacher said, “The match [with the peer coach] was great because I have the students she had last year.” The teacher had wanted to pair with the other teacher because she felt that the teacher could help her develop an understanding of the students that she now had. Another teacher knew that his partner had expertise in using technology in the classroom, an area he was not familiar with. He stated, “I have struggled with technology in my class. It seems that the students are always using it so I need to find ways to incorporate it into my teaching. Everyone knows he [partner teacher] is the best in the school [for using technology].”

The school has a number of focus areas for teaching. These had been identified by the administrative team as primary areas of focus and school improvement. These included differentiation and supports for students with special education needs, questioning techniques

that aim for higher level thinking, incorporation of technology, and use of a variety of teaching strategies and techniques. Teachers were encouraged to choose an area of focus related to one of these areas but were not required to. Those teachers who participated in the study chose the following focus areas: integration of technology, differentiation for students with special education needs, classroom management techniques, and questioning techniques.

The school has had an active professional development culture so the implementation of peer coaching did not seem to concern the teachers who participated in the study. They each expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to engage in professional learning with their peers. They were enthusiastic about identifying focus areas, visiting each other's classes, and debriefing with their peer and the author. One participant stated, "I have been excited about visiting the class of [name of teacher]. I've heard a lot of good things about what she does so I am excited to learn from her." None of the participants expressed any concerns about their peers providing unsuitable feedback or experiencing a power differential with them. They each actively engaged with the visits to their peer's classroom, taking notes and occasionally involving themselves in activities. Students were introduced to the visitors (peer teacher and author), but the students quickly returned their attention to their regular classroom teacher.

After both peers had visited each other's classes, they then found a common time to meet and debrief about the experience. One teacher talked about the value of these debrief experiences, stating,

I cannot say enough about the opportunity to debrief after the visit. The observation time was excellent but being able to debrief later that day, while the experience was still new, really helped me understand some of the things she was doing.

The school administrators provided time at staff meetings to check in with the teachers to gain insight into how the process was going and to provide feedback and further professional development. Teachers and school administrators incorporated readings on peer coaching within staff meetings and professional development activities. They also provided an opportunity for teachers to talk about the experience. The ability to not only observe other classrooms but also to debrief the experience was seen as a valuable experience for the participants.

## **Lessons for Effective Implementation**

### ***Potential barriers***

A number of barriers to effective implementation were identified. First, the peers did not identify specific areas of focus for their peer coach. Instead, they identified general items such as “technology,” “differentiation,” or “classroom management.” It was thus difficult for the peer coach to provide specific feedback on the area of focus since the areas were so general and overarching. As a result, the peers provided broad feedback, more on general aspects of the lesson than on a specific area of focus. For example, in one debrief meeting, the peer observer stated, “Your classroom management needs improvement. You were not even noticing the behaviour of some of the students in the back. I suggest you change your seating assignments.” As the debrief meeting proceeded, the peer who had been observed indicated that she was really hoping for feedback on how to manage the behaviour of one student with a significant learning difficulty. The feedback she received was not related to that student because she had not specified what aspects of classroom management for the peer to focus on during the classroom visit.

A second barrier was that peers provided feedback that was not clearly related to the area of focus. The feedback tended to be about ways that the peer could teach something differently than what had been observed. For example, one teacher criticized a teacher's responses to a child with a special education need in the class, but this was not the area that the observed teacher had asked for feedback. The situation could have been alleviated if the observed teacher had clearly identified that when she asked for feedback on "differentiation," she was really looking for input on adapting reading texts for different ability levels.

A third barrier was the limited awareness that peers had of each other's classes or the systems that were used to manage them. For example, one of the peer coaches asked, "Do you penalize students for lateness?" Although not related to the area of focus, this became an issue requiring clarification. The lack of knowledge about these types of practices became distractions for the peer coach.

These barriers were not difficult to overcome. The collegial nature of the pairings provided opportunities for the teachers to clarify, prompt, question, and make suggestions without impeding the sense of trust and reciprocity that seemed to permeate the pairs. However, requesting specific feedback, providing feedback directly related to the identified area, and having a stronger awareness of the general operating principles of the classrooms would have minimized the potential of these barriers existing.

### ***Potential pathways to effective practice***

One of the successful aspects of the implementation of peer coaching was the establishment of supportive, trusting relationships between the peers. It was clear that, even though they did not always have previous relationships, they seemed to quickly establish a trust in their peer. One peer commented, "I am not afraid of them [peer teacher] coming into my class



because I know that we are both teachers who are just trying to do the best we can.” Pairs were formed in the same school division so this trust may have been supplemented by the fact that the pairs were often teaching the same children and, thus, may have had similar teaching experiences.

A second effective aspect of the implementation process was the ability of pairs to be self-reflective when asked to consider the class that they had taught. They shared their insights into how the lesson had progressed, especially in relationship to their focus area. They asked for clarification from each other and were often empathetic, using “we” much more than “you.” An example of how they did not allocate blame to a peer if something did not go well was the comment of one peer coach who, in response to a question about technology integration, said, “I think we need to address this as a school so it is not just you.” Peers desired authentic feedback, in many cases saying, “What do you think I should do?” The school had clearly built a safe and trusting environment for the teachers to feel as comfortable as they did with sharing feedback and insight with each other.

Another catalyst for success was the investment of the school administration into providing release time for peer coaches to visit their peer’s class. The teachers knew that the school administrators were invested since they were often the ones who covered the classes of those who left to visit their peer’s classes. One teacher commented, “You need to understand. This is unheard of in Egypt. School principals do not take over classrooms so that teachers can have time to plan together.” The school administrators also built time into their staff meetings to provide professional materials on peer coaching and to discuss the insights and challenges that teachers were encountering. In this school’s case, there was a very supportive administrative team which provided ample flexibility and freedom for teachers to self-select peer coaches. They

provided guidance on themes for professional growth but did not mandate these. Thus, the administrative support was beneficial to the overall effective implementation of peer coaching in the school.

Peer coaching was facilitated through the ability of the teachers to engage in trusting relationships, be self-reflective, and have a strong, supportive administrative team.

### **Discussion**

The experience of this school in implementing a peer coaching model helps illustrate the process of engaging in peer coaching and also lessons that other schools may consider when implementing peer coaching. To position the relevance of the findings, we return to Ladyshefsky's (2017) key aspects of peer coaching.

#### **Establishing Peer Partners**

Ladyshefsky (2017) indicated, "While it may seem very obvious that peers should support peers, it often doesn't happen naturally" (p. 5). As a result, it is important that peer partnerships be established carefully. Critical to the partnership is that the individuals are seen as equals, not supervising each other, nor formally accountable to each other (Ladyshefsky, 2017). Thus, establishing peer partnerships which are recognized by the peers as authentic, helpful, and non-threatening is key to the success of the peer coaching implementation.

Teachers in the study had freedom in determining who their peer coaches would be; the partnerships were not determined by the school administration. The peers in the study chose their partners largely out of their self-determined instructional needs. On multiple occasions, teachers commented that the relationship that was established with their peer partner was based on trust and openness. None of the teachers appeared to be threatened by their peer coach, likely due to the fact that the peers were in an equal relationship and none of the peers were being evaluated

by their partner. The establishment of peer partners on a volunteer basis, with instructional needs at the core of the relationships, aligns with Ladyshefsky's premise that effective peer coaching is predicated on supportive, non-evaluative partnerships. Establishing peer partners voluntarily has bearing on other school contexts in the Global South where options for professional development may be limited. Peer coaching is a simple, cost-effective way for teachers to access professional support; the only determinant is to have a peer teacher who is willing to work alongside another with the goal of mutual professional benefit.

### **Building Trust**

Once peer coaching partnerships have been established, it is important that the partners foster a trusting relationship. The foundation of the trust is built on the non-evaluative nature of the peer coaching framework. Trust also can be nurtured through ongoing interactions with each other and specific discussions about how the pair will manage their discussions. Ladyshefsky (2017) stated, "This sense of safety creates a positive emotional state and facilitates the neural mechanisms that support learning" (p. 7). Simply establishing peer partnerships is not enough; effective peer coaching is facilitated when the partners trust each other.

One of the observations of peer coaching in this context was that the peer partners trusted each other, evidenced through the collegial and supportive conversations that the peers had. Participants indicated that their administrative supervisors did not pry into the types of conversations that were taking place between the peers, thus increasing the level of trust that the peers had with each other. The peer coaches did not fear any kind of interference from their supervising administrator. Netolicky (2016) stated, "Context is a key consideration for those schools undertaking coaching initiatives" (p. 81). Peer coaching allowed teachers to provide feedback to each other on authentic and meaningful topics connected with school focus areas

(Yee, 2016). Doing so without the influence of an administrator seemed to give teachers a stronger sense of trust in their partner. Teachers also identified that the process provided an opportunity for increased “hallway” conversations, which are the kinds of casual conversations that teachers have in staff rooms and in informal settings. Thus, the peer coaching model provided teachers with opportunities for conversations and classroom observation visits which were established in an environment of confidentiality and support. This reflects Ladyshevsky’s emphasis on trust as a hallmark of effective peer coaching.

### **Identifying Areas to Target**

Peer coaching is not just built on trusting peer relationships; according to Ladyshevsky (2017), to be effective, specific areas of improvement need to be identified. He stated, “Each party needs to identify what they are struggling with at work or wanting to learn or improve” (p. 7). The establishment of targeted areas of improvement ensures that peer coaching is not just about teaching relationships but about improvement of teaching practices to positively effect student learning outcomes.

One of the challenges of implementing the peer coaching model was that the teachers did not identify specific areas of focus for classroom observation blocks. These classroom visits provided the peer coaches with important pedagogical insights that enriched their discussions. However, it was common for the person who was teaching to ask for feedback on general topics such as “differentiation” or “technology.” As a result, the visiting partners struggled with providing specific and constructive input. The visiting partner would frequently provide general feedback on the lesson, even when not identified as a targeted area. A result was that peers perceived a more evaluative process (e.g., “I liked when you did ...”), thus moving away from a non-judgement form of professional learning (Ladyshevsky, 2017). When the visiting teacher

was provided with clear directions for the area of feedback that was requested, the teacher was more effectively able to provide feedback. Having specific areas of focus for the pairs, both in their meeting times and classroom observation visits, helped to provide a framework to know what to observe and the types of feedback to provide in the specific area.

One of the challenges of peer coaching in the school context was that some teachers felt that they needed to “fix” the other teacher. They identified areas of perceived weakness in the lesson, even if outside of the area that they had been asked to observe and respond to. One teacher asked in a critical and non-collegial way, “Why would you have the students sit in those groups? I would never allow them to do that.” The observed teachers identified that it was important to re-direct these types of conversations back to those in which colleagues provided constructive feedback to the peer in the focused area requested. As other schools in the Global South consider peer coaching as a framework for professional development, it is important to provide direction for teachers so they know how to identify specific areas of focus and improvement. Schools in Western contexts may be familiar with SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timely), and it would be helpful for schools in other contexts to consider the acronym as a way to target areas of focus.

### **Training on Questions and Feedback**

Ladyshewsky (2017) claimed, “Asking non-evaluative questions is the most challenging part of the peer coaching process” (p. 8). It is indeed a challenge for teachers to ask questions that guide reflection and discussion without becoming evaluative. It is important to provide training so that teachers can maintain the trusting, collegial, non-evaluative relationships that are integral to the effectiveness of peer coaching.

In the school context, very little training was provided about how to ask effective questions and how to provide non-evaluative feedback to their peers. The pairs struggled to have a guided conversation on the classroom observation. The participants and author developed the following structure to help in the debrief process.

1. Person being observed reflects on how he or she thought things went well (e.g., What is one thing that I did well?).
2. Observer gives one to two positive things related to the class observed and one to three items of feedback specific to the focus area.
3. Person being observed responds.

Once the framework was established, the pairs worked well within it and commented on how it helped provide structure to the conversation. The ability to overcome challenges speaks strongly to the value of experiential learning where teachers are enabled to set direction in ways which are authentic for them (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). It might not always be “clean” and clear, but often the learning from these “messy” types of learning experiences can be rich and authentic (Robbins, 2015). Further, teachers demonstrated emerging agency through the process.

The structure of problem-solving aligns with Ladyshefsky’s (2017) suggestion that “Rather than telling individuals what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ about their practice and what they ‘should’ do, non-evaluative questions start with the words who, what, where, when and how” (p. 8). Schools in other contexts in the Global South will need to consider developing training opportunities to support teachers in asking non-evaluative questions. Providing a simple outline of questioning, such as what was done in the Egyptian school, will help alleviate the potential that feedback becomes evaluative and judgemental.

## Peer Support

Peer coaching is built on experiential learning principles by which one learns from previous experiences through reflection and action-planning (Kolb, 1984). In alignment with these principles, Ladyshevsky (2017) suggested that peer coaches do not need to be experts but colleagues who help each other discover their own solutions. Thus, peer support is needed not so much to provide feedback or input, but to help guide the peer partner to their own considerations for changed teaching practices.

As is the case in the Global South, many of the teachers at the Egyptian school do not have formal teacher education backgrounds. A number of teachers indicated that they felt their teaching skills were weak or they lacked confidence in them. Peer coaching provided a means to address their perceived deficiencies. Teachers paired with teachers whom they respected and who had an area of interest that they were hoping to develop. These aspects of peer support helped each person reflect on their practices and identify new action steps for future teaching practice. The feedback from peer coaches validates the professional knowledge and insights that peer-to-peer coaching provides (Theeboom *et al.*, 2014). The value of the feedback also highlights the importance of experiential learning, not just for students but also for teachers (Kolb, 1984). Engaging in a process of identifying how to provide feedback to peers, without strong direction from the administrators, forced the peer colleagues to consider how to best provide input and critical feedback. The process of doing so builds teachers' confidence and agency, thus facilitating further problem-solving skills in the future (Biesta *et al.*, 2015; Charteris and Smardon, 2014). It also demonstrates a form of distributed leadership that is important for teachers to replicate with their students (Barnett *et al.*, 2017). Each of the teaching pairs involved in the study identified areas in which they wanted to continue to develop their teaching abilities,

thus reflecting professional development in line with Ladyshevsky's (2017) contention that peer coaching can serve as an effective way to foster professional skills and knowledge. Similarly, in other contexts in the Global South, teachers have a deep desire to be effective in their teaching abilities (Sider, 2014). The peer support that is provided through peer coaching can serve as a means to support professional capacity with minimal cost and direction.

The key aspects that Ladyshevsky (2017) identified as important to the effective implementation of peer coaching appear to be relevant to a school in Egypt. Schools in the Global South can learn from this experience. For example, the establishment of peer coaches through a self-selecting process was a simple and effective method of implementation. There was minimal involvement of the school administrators in the peer coaching process, and this could be emulated by other schools in the Global South. The potential barriers to effective implementation that have been identified here, such as not having a framework to guide discussions or having limited training on asking supportive, non-threatening questions, can be alleviated through professional learning sessions. When provided with training on facilitated conversations and questioning techniques, the participants in the study responded effectively to providing targeted areas of input and feedback. The peer support structure provided specific, authentic, and embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers, a hallmark of effective professional development (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). As schools in the Global South strive to provide effective learning environments for their students, peer coaching can support enhanced professional abilities of teachers in cost-effective ways.

Although peer coaching is a simple and inexpensive form of enhancing teacher professional competency, schools and school systems in the Global South which are considering implementing a peer coaching model should be careful and deliberate in establishing the peer



coaching framework (Robbins, 2015). Teachers need to have a strong sense of purpose and trust in the process of implementation (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). Teachers also need to be provided with professional development sessions as the peer coaching framework is rolled out. Professional development sessions could include topics such as how to be a supportive colleague, how to ask non-evaluative questions and provide feedback, and how to track the areas of focus over the course of the year to assess for effectiveness.

### **Conclusion: Implications, Limitations, Recommendations**

#### **Implications**

The study provides insights into the experiences of eight teachers who partnered with each other as the peer coaching framework was initiated and their early experiences in engaging in the process. The study provides multiple opportunities for further research. Comparative and international research that considers other locations in the Global South can enrich the research that has taken place in Western contexts and can provide insight into how peer coaching is perceived as a form of professional development. Further studies need to consider how teachers develop critical, reflective, and analytical skills to engage in peer coaching (Murray *et al.*, 2009). It would also be interesting to examine how teachers make decisions to engage others as peer coaches. Understanding what motivates teachers to pair with other teachers would be helpful to understanding the peer coaching process and to clarify the roles that peer partners play (Murray *et al.*, 2009).

Early themes have been identified that demonstrate how the teachers perceive the impact of peer coaching. First, peers noted that they had become more reflective through the process since they were thinking about more focused areas of professional learning. Their growth mindset and trust in the process is reflected in the “What do you think I should do?” questions

that were asked of each other. These are the types of professional questions and dispositions which are reflected in effective teachers (Breyfogle, 2005; Stronge, 2018). Peer coaching supports the development of these types of effective teaching practices (Kohler *et al.*, 1997).

Second, teachers identified that they had become increasingly open to the feedback from their peers. They indicated that this was because the interactions had been positive and helpful in improving teaching practices. One participant commented, “We even call each other on Saturdays.” The ability to communicate in a variety of ways and times is a powerful illustration of authentic, ongoing peer coaching that has moved outside the “system” of peer coaching that the school has initiated. Again, this reflects effective teaching practices and aligns with literature that supports peer coaching as an authentic form of professional learning that is valued by teachers (Houchens *et al.*, 2017; Netolicky, 2016).

A third, albeit unintended, consequence of peer coaching that impacted teaching practices was a result of simply visiting classrooms beyond one’s own. Each participant commented that they had developed new teaching ideas when observing effective practices of their peers. The opportunity to visit other classrooms, observe, and engage in professional conversations about these observations supports effective teaching practices (Borich, 2016). These aspects of peer coaching implementation provide important opportunities for further research to consider how to implement peer coaching in other school contexts.

## **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to the study. First, only the early implementation processes and experiences are reported. Further research will explore the ongoing pathways to effective implementation, as well as the challenges and barriers. This also raises the question of how to define an implementation aspect as a barrier or an opportunity. The study used the

feedback of the peer coaching pairs to define barriers and opportunities but could be further enhanced through a deeper analysis in alignment with the academic literature.

A second limitation of the study is that it was based in one school. Schools in Egypt, and in other contexts in the Global South, struggle with many challenging aspects which may make the implementation of peer coaching difficult even when teachers are eager to engage in professional development (Abdelrahman and Irby, 2016; El-Bilawi and Nasser, 2017). It is important to recognize that there were many contextual factors which facilitated the implementation of the peer coaching framework in this research context.

A third limitation of the study is the small sample of teachers who participated in the study. Although they represented each of the grade divisions in the school, they did not necessarily represent all of the teachers at the school. They were eager to participate in peer coaching and in the study; thus, they may have demonstrated more positive attitudes toward the implementation of peer coaching in the school. Different types of data sources should be considered in future studies. For example, the Egyptian school is considering events where teachers will share with each other about their learning experiences through the peer coaching process. Such data could help provide a more holistic perspective of all the teachers at the school.

Finally, the study is limited in that it did not examine the impact of peer coaching on student outcomes, a key aspect of Guskey's (2002) model of effective teacher professional development. Future studies could consider quantitative measures to identify the impact on teacher efficacy and student learning outcomes (Murray *et al.*, 2009).

## **Recommendations**

Peer coaching appears to be an effective way to support teacher professional learning in a way that is meaningful. It holds great promise for the professional development of teachers, not only in the Global South but also in all contexts because it addresses one of the primary considerations for effective teacher professional development, that it is authentic and meaningful (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2009). However, to be as effective as possible, it must be facilitated in an intentional way (Knapp, 2003) and with a strategic plan for implementation (Ladyshevsky, 2017). Effective peer coaching needs to provide time for teachers to visit each other's classes, although it is difficult to ascertain how frequently these visits should occur to maximize their usefulness. As well, administrators responsible for implementing peer coaching could provide direction and focus to the areas of peer observation to connect with school improvement areas and/or teacher identified areas of professional growth. Direction-setting could also include a facilitation of a process of reflection, goal-setting, ongoing learning, with follow-up activities and interactions (Desimone, 2009). At the same time, it is important not to be too prescriptive as the flexibility and embedded nature of peer coaching is what supports authentic teacher learning (Robbins, 2015).

Peer coaching holds great promise for embedded, meaningful, and effective teacher professional development. Given the positive implementation process in this study, it also appears to have potential to be effective in diverse contexts, including those in the Global South. The research addresses the gap in the scholarly literature related to peer coaching in international contexts. It also raises ideas for next steps for research on peer coaching and its implementation as a form of professional learning for teachers in global contexts.

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