

# Developing a culture of mentoring and coaching

in a mainstream secondary context through the use of lesson study

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## ABSTRACT

Mentoring and coaching has been highlighted as one of the most underused strategies to develop whole school development for teachers, and in many cases mentoring and coaching's value, as a cognitive leadership approach, can have invaluable impact on leading change, and the outcomes for learners (Cameron & Green 2012). The study explores how mentoring and coaching is used, to develop collaborative professionalism through the use of lesson study to improve teaching and learning outcomes in a mainstream secondary context. It highlights how shared collaborative practice leads to effective teaching and learning practice, which not only impacts positively on teaching staff, but on learner experiences too.

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, the education landscape has seen a wide range of changes and alterations, with the implementation of the 2010 White Paper (DfE 2010). Many of the initiatives and strategies implemented in schools, such as the Early Professional Development strategies, rolled out by the Teaching Development Agency, were made redundant (Moor et al. 2005). Schools had to find alternative ways to focus on staff development. With shrinking budgets, in-school master's (MA) development was no longer funded; however, some schools continued to prioritise master's-level development to encourage deep reflection on

practice. These contexts continued to encourage deep reflection, professional collaboration, evidence-based practice and research engagement.

The study is based in a mainstream secondary context, where the school continued to invest in master's-level studies for staff, as a whole-school continued professional development approach. Not all staff were engaged in this initiative, and staff could enter or exit the programme in a bespoke fashion to ensure that it met their individual learning needs.

Furthermore, one of the requirements of the school was that the master's-level modules had to be in line with

## KEYWORDS

MENTORING

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LESSON STUDY

the school's development need focus areas. The school's pupil demographic reflects a diverse group of learners, where more than half of the school population are English as an Additional Language (EAL). The school's learners also reflect a large proportion of learners who are on Free School Meals and Pupil Premium. Staff are highly committed to ensuring that their practice impacts positively on the outcomes of learners, and the school strives to find a wide range of strategies to develop staff to ensure that they are able to be the best they can be for the learners in their care.

The school aimed to have a stronger focus on refining teaching and

learning practices for all staff. However, it was not keen to deliver traditional in-service training days where often short sharp sessions were delivered in ideas and tips. Instead, the school governing body and senior leadership team hoped to encourage staff to take a more investigative approach to their own practice, finding out for themselves what their learners need, and how to develop practices that will help learners best. However, they were clear that they did not want the learning and development of staff to occur top-down, but rather to become a staff-led approach, for staff from staff – a collaborative learning approach for all to benefit from.

### RATIONALE

Based on the desire to ensure that the staff development focus was led for staff by staff, the MA group was seen as a main vehicle to develop an approach that will help others to grow. As a result, it was decided that the MA module for the term will be focusing on mentoring and coaching, with the aim to focus on teaching and learning practices. The focus explored how coaching and mentoring can be used to refine practice with a lesson study focus. The MA group was allowed to decide what aspect of teaching and learning development they wanted to focus on, and what would make the greatest impact on staff's learning with the aim to refine teaching and learning practice.

The MA group identified that they would like to focus on how informal lesson observations and collaborative professionalism can help develop improved teaching and learning practices based on the work of Hargreaves & O'Connor (2018).

The school still graded lessons and expected lesson plans to be submitted, contrary to many of the expectations of the current Ofsted Framework for Schools (Ofsted 2014). The aim was to start small and then to ripple the initiative out to other staff members, through a more

enriching staff-led, twilight, sharing best practice from the learning the group did in the first term. The aim was to develop others in mentoring and coaching strategies, and then repeat the learning process led by the MA group on a whole school basis, focusing on lesson study and collaborative professionalism.

Initially, 9 colleagues signed up for the MA sessions, but soon 4 others joined the initiative out of a staff body of 80 teachers and 20 learning support assistants. The learning opportunity was open for all staff, and the group mirrored that; out of the 13 participants, 10 were teaching staff and 3 were members of the support staff body.

### MENTORING AND COACHING: WHEN TO COACH AND WHEN TO MENTOR

A great deal has been written over the last few years about mentoring and coaching. However, in many cases definitions for coaching and mentoring are not clear, and the terms are used interchangeably (Sundli 2007; Tilemma et al. 2011). For the purpose of the study, mentoring is defined as 'telling' a process by which the mentor guides and provides guidance to help the mentee to progress (Hughes 2003), whereas coaching is defined as a 'conversation tool' (Van Nieuwenburgh 2017) to unlock the coachee's potential (Whitmore 2017). The key is to know when to use mentoring and coaching effectively to make the most of the talents of those you support. Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986), Tannenbaum & Schmidt (2009) and Blanchard et al. (2018) outline that it is important to ensure that you have a clear understanding of the development phases of your mentee or coachee. Tannenbaum & Schmidt (2009) suggest that at novice stage it is best to lead on 'telling' and guidance, and at a more advanced stage of the mentee's development it is often sensible to start moving towards questioning and negotiation skills to enable the mentee to reflect on his/her

practice and start solving problems for themselves. The key is to be able to assess as a mentor when to start moving towards coaching strategies; however, when that does happen, it is important to have the coachee's consent to coach, as the coachee is fully in control of the coaching relationship (Hughes 2003). The coaching conversation is a 'non-judgemental' relationship (Whitmore 2017) which lends itself more to a collaborative approach in terms of lesson study, and collaborative professionalism as described by Hargreaves & O'Connor (2018).

### LESSON STUDY AND ITS ROLE IN COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Lesson study has its origin in Japan, and is a teacher-led research approach. Teachers, collaboratively identify a target which needs addressing in their pupils' learning (Stepanek et al. 2006). As a collective, they identify a focus, collaboratively plan and deliver lessons, and observe practice to evaluate the impact of the lesson, and how the issue is addressed. This collaborative approach greatly encourages collaborative professionalism where teachers are able to evaluate their practice in a safe space, and reflect on ways forward, in communities of practice (DuFor 2004; Wood 2007); Hargreaves & O'Connor 2018). These communities of practice provide opportunities for teachers to explore new ways forward to address their learners' needs. They are able to mentor and coach each other, to address specific learning needs in an environment where the challenge is high but the stakes are low (Myatt 2018).

Lesson study is an approach to developing teaching and learning, alongside coaching and mentoring. It offers an ideal opportunity for a staff-led-school development approach, firmly anchored in evidence-based practice, to support school improvement and development. This was why the MA group felt that it

would be a suitable method to use to move forward with their focus and research.

The role of collaborative professionalism in developing teaching practice

Beabout (2012) highlighted that when turbulence occurs in the workplace, whether it is because of a new policy implemented by those in power or a new initiative by school leaders, it always impacts on how teachers feel.

Turbulence can cause a great deal of worry and concern if the stakes are high, and it is therefore important to work with colleagues to ensure that the challenge is high, to move to perturbation, where the threat is low (Beabout 2012; Myatt 2018).

Making others feel safe is key (Maslow 1943 as cited in Cameron & Green 2012), and ensuring that colleagues are in a calm limbic state is imperative to make the most of their talents (Rock 2010). It is therefore important to ensure that opportunities are created where colleagues can work collaboratively, without fear, in a creative environment, where they are openly able to question, challenge, evaluate and learn from each other, as a key part of the learning journey the MA group is keen to be on (Hargreaves & O'Connor 2018). It was therefore decided that a collaborative

professional approach is a key ingredient to the way in which the project needed to be approached. It was important to the group to encourage more collaboration, and to lead the project; it was by staff for staff, and the key was that no aspect of the project must be done to others (Hughes 2003).

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed research methodology (Creswell 2009; Cohen et al. 2011). Initially, to gain an understanding of staff's views on lesson observations and collaborative work, a questionnaire was developed, and careful consideration was given to question design as recommended by Oppenheim (1998).

No formal mentoring or coaching system existed, and it was decided to focus the questionnaire on the existing observation and feedback system at the school, and how that enabled staff to refine their practice or to improve. The questionnaire was sent out to all staff, including support staff, to gain a detailed understanding of their views and needs.

The questions were also developed to collect quantitative data, in line with the ethos of the collaborative community of learning's practices, and were

agreed upon.

The questions were designed to cover the following areas:

- Use of lesson observation forms
- Feedback from lesson observations
- Consistency
- Training received as observers
- Observer preferences

A research tool was developed which aimed to collect qualitative data to evaluate what the impact of the collaborative groups was and where and how mentoring and coaching supported staff to move their learning forward (Creswell 2009; Cohen et al 2011). It was developed in the form of a formative lesson observations proforma in line with the Ofsted Framework for School Inspections (Ofsted 2014). The aim was to use the proforma after lessons were planned collaboratively with a shared focus. The purpose of the proforma was to evaluate the impact of the new strategies regarding the identified focus for the lesson observation.

The collaborative planning cycle and the peer observation approach took place over a period of six weeks. At the end of the period of collaborative learning and peer observation, the impact on teaching and learning was evaluated through the observation proforma, evaluations of participants and engagement of learners.

Participants were asked to share their views during their evaluations of their practice to gain an understanding of how they felt their practice benefited from the project.

All the necessary ethical considerations were made in line with British Educational Research Association guidance (BERA 2018), including permissions, and all data and information were anonymised throughout the research, in line with the Data Protection Act (2018).



*Mentoring. Creative Commons.*

## FINDINGS

The questionnaire was shared with all staff including support staff, as they are often observed too. There were 50 respondents. The detail reflected the following views from staff:

	Number of respondents				
	4- outstanding, 3- good, 2- requires improvement, 1- not happy at all	%		How consistent do you feel the observation practices are across the school? (1- inconsistent, 2- some inconsistencies, 3- fairly consistent, 4- consistent)	%
	How satisfied are you with the current observation practices in school?		4	2	5
4	0	0	3	13	32.5
3	0	0	2	1	2.5
2	18	45	1	24	60
1	22	55		What types of feedback did you receive after your observation? (1- formal, 2- a mix of formal and informal, 3- a quick chat, 4- written feedback)	%
	How beneficial do you feel formative observations will be? (1- no benefits, 2- depends on the focus, 3- some benefits, 4- highly beneficial)	%	4	7	17.5
4	1	2.5	3	3	7.5
3	2	5	2	7	17.5
2	16	40	1	23	57.5
1	21			Have you ever been trained to observe others in your department? (1- No training, 2- I arranged my own training, 3- some training, 4- fully trained)	%
	How confident are you in observing others? (1 - not confident, 2- I have some idea how, 3- some confidence, 4- confident)	%	4	3	7.5
4	0	0	3	5	12.5
3	5		2	5	12.5
2	7		1	27	67.5
1	28	70		Who would you like to observe you? (1- head of department, 2 – assistant headteacher for T and L, 3- peer, 4- mentor or coach)	%
			1	1	2.5
			2	1	2.5
			3	6	15
			4	32	80

After the baseline data was collected, the study focused on designing the observation proforma/ research tool in a collaborative way. The key focus was to ensure that the collaborative focus was highlighted, together with the strengths of the lesson, and areas for refinement and next steps. The emphasis was to focus on the positive, to help develop a positive, safe working environment where colleagues could develop their self-

efficacy in a supportive way (Hargreaves & O'Connor 2018). The proforma outlined these points as follows:

<b>Outline at least three areas of strengths of the lesson:</b>
<b>Effective teaching points:</b>
<b>Effective learning points:</b>
<b>Pupil progress and attainment:</b>
<b>Collaborative lesson study focus:</b>
<b>Areas for refinement:</b>
<b>Next steps in relation to the collaborative lesson study focus:</b>

The proforma was used over a six-week cycle and participants had to evaluate the impact of the formative observations, mentoring or coaching weekly by reflecting on the impact of the learning on their practice. The MA group led small groups in their respective departments, collecting their individual data which fed into the project. In addition, all participants had received training on how to coach and mentor, how to feedback and when to coach or mentor.

Furthermore, pupils' attainment was tracked throughout the six-week cycle. It was noticeable that, during the observations, greater pupil engagement was highlighted due to the range of activities used in the lesson. Participants highlighted that they had more time to 'share ideas' and 'more time to plan', which enriched the learning experience.

As a result, learners were more positive and engaged during their learning. Pupils overall were on track and meeting their target minimum grades, or attainment gaps were narrowing. However, a limitation of the study is that it was only a six-week cycle; it would be ideal if it could be a longer study to evaluate the full impact of the approach. However, authors such as Hargreaves & O'Connor (2018) highlight a very positive impact of lesson study on both staff and learners' outcomes. I am hoping to take this further and look into this aspect of lesson study in more depth in future.

Respondents' evaluations and reflections were provided as part of the process when using the observation too. These reflections will be further explored when evaluating the outcomes in the section below.

## EVALUATION

What stands out from the dataset is the fact that there is a clear dissatisfaction with the use of a summative approach to observations. 55% of the respondents highlighted that they were not happy with the observation practices within the context. 92.5% of the respondents felt that a more formative approach would be beneficial. 70% of the respondents highlighted that they were not confident when observing others, and 60% highlighted that they did not feel summative observations were consistent across the context they were in. 57% of the respondents received written feedback, whereas practices varied greatly for the others. 67.5% of the respondents outlined that they were not trained to observe and 80% highlighted that they felt that working with a mentor would greatly benefit them.

When looking at the feedback provided by participants based on their experiences of coaching or mentoring during the project, the general theme was that it 'unlocked' their own potential (Whitmore 2017). Colleagues were trained as coaches and mentors, and clarity was provided

regarding the roles. One participant shared the following:

*'I always thought that coaching was something used to manage people who are failing in school, but this project showed me how powerful coaching can be, and how I can help others to blossom.'*

Participants felt that the project contributed positively to their own learning. For example:

*'I have been a teacher for more than 13 years, and I always worry about being observed, and what will happen if things don't go well. I really appreciated being observed and getting feedback in a friendly, non-threatening situation. I felt energised...'*

Many felt that they were ready to do more, and were enthused by their practice, which echoes Hargreaves & O'Connor's (2018) findings on collaborative professionalism.

Feedback stated that coachees felt that they were able to find their own solutions and work with others to meet the collaborative goals. For example:

*'I now don't mind being observed by colleagues as we are all trying to work towards the same goal.'*

One recently qualified teacher (RQT) joined the study, and reflected that her mentor really acted as a supportive guide when it was stated that:

*'I loved working with a mentor, I am in my 3rd year of teaching and it really helped to share ideas. It was informative, and I feel motivated to try new things.'*

It is imperative for a coach/mentor to pitch it right; it is key to know when to mentor and when to coach. The RQT's relationship is described as mentoring, which highlights that more support was needed before coaching could be considered (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986; Tochon & Munby 1993; Hobson et al. 2009).

Evaluations suggested that during feedback opportunities, effective professional development took place through reflection (Pollard 2005). For example:

*'I worked with a more experienced colleague. The uncomplicated nature of the proforma allowed for a useful, constructive conversation to take place... She reflected on what worked and how to refine her practice by talking it through.'*

What stood out from many of the responses was the fact that mentees and coachees experienced a real fear of observation. By removing this fear through the collaborative learning opportunities, and working with supportive colleagues, they were able to see the observations as learning opportunities. For example:

*'I am terrified of being observed, and I found the proforma very effective and non-threatening. I like the idea that the coachee is in control of the journey. It was good to be asked open questions to find my own answers. I do feel you need the right training to help you to make the most of the learning.'*

Words such as 'terrified' were used to describe their feelings regarding observations, and it was interesting to see how they started to feel 'safe' (Maslow 1943, as cited in Cameron and Green 2012), and how they were able to enjoy their learning to help their learners learn.

Having a clear focus was felt to be a real benefit, and having a collective focus removed the pressures from the observation, and it became a 'high challenge, low threat' (Mayatt 2018) experience. One participant stated that:

*'Working on a focus means that there are no surprises, and I can relax when I am being observed.'*

By removing the high stakes, staff were able to open up to learning, embrace their learning and become more creative as a result.

Participants indicated that there was a mutual benefit from this experience too. Mentors and coaches highlighted that they too enjoyed the opportunity to work with others, and it was pointed out that, as their mentees or coachees grew in confidence, they gained more confidence and were motivated to refine their own practice as mentors and coaches too:

*'As my mentee grew in confidence, I grew as a mentor too, it motivated me...'*

An important point was made regarding time. Ensuring that enough time is invested in the coaching and mentoring process to ensure that colleagues can fully engage with the support they are offered is vital. One colleague stressed this point in the evaluation too:

*'It did take a bit of time to learn how to coach... I think it is important to allocate time to do the job well though.'*

The first stage of the project is now completed, and stage two of the project needs to start sharing the practice with others.

## CONCLUSION

The main learning from the study was that coaching and mentoring, when used effectively, in line with the growth and development needs of staff, can have a very powerful impact on their development and self-efficacy. In addition, working collaboratively on a common goal not only pulls the team together, and creates a positive, creative environment, the collective responsibility also removes the

fear factor from high-stakes observations. Having a collegiate approach to tackling issues within the teaching and learning practices in a department or school helps to highlight it in a safe way for teams who can then proactively tackle core issues, and move learning forward. Coaching and mentoring play an important role in positive school cultures to help teachers grow and develop their practice. It was emphasised throughout the study that there needs to be a clear understanding of what coaching and mentoring is, to ensure that it can be used in the most effective way to support others. Time budgets need to be considered as well, to ensure that staff can fully engage with the collaborative learning groups to develop their practice fully too. ■

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