

Improving Mentoring Practices through Collaborative Conversations

A Thinkpiece Working Paper by Rachel Lofthouse

Providing a mentor for beginning teachers means giving them support and ensuring that they build up their professional capacity, knowledge and skills. A mentor is usually a colleague with relevant, school-specific experience. Mentoring also bridges the transition between initial teacher education and full employment. In some situations, mentors make judgements or provide evidence that the new teacher has demonstrated required professional competencies.

While national and cultural expectations of mentoring vary, engaging in mentoring conversations is common. However, in most educational contexts there is limited time for teachers' professional development. It is therefore critical that where time is assigned for mentoring the professional dialogue is engaging and productive.

'Targets' (usually about teaching and learning) are a common part of mentoring or coaching conversations: deliberating over what targets should be prioritised, making targets realistic and measurable, evaluating progress towards them and providing feedback prior to setting new ones can become an all-consuming activity. Add in workload pressures, anxieties about being judged or having to make judgements, and the mentoring conversations can become restrictive. They can go one of two ways: some people experience them as having high stakes, others feel they become relatively superficial.

How can we ensure that mentoring enables genuine learning processes?

Mentoring conversations can be a transformative space where important aspects of professional practice are debated and emerging professional identities, both as a new teacher and a mentor, can be constructed. Creating a genuinely valuable mentoring experience is possible, and much of it comes through conversation.

Trust seems critical, but cannot be assumed. Opportunities to explore problems without fear of punitive judgement need to be created. Respect for the value of the combined expertise offered by the unique mentoring partnership needs to be felt. Even the newest teachers have something to offer their mentor, so mentoring can be a two way dialogue. Lessons from research can help teachers conduct better mentoring conversations. Following a UK research project on teacher coaching, we began to understand professional dialogue through what we called coaching dimensions.

First, there is a need to 'stimulate'. Good mentors know how to initiate thoughtful reflections and stimulate decisions with their mentee. But they also know when hold back and let the beginning teacher take the initiative. They are aware of how to collect and use available learning tools. Some use videos of lessons (their own and their mentees'); some make lesson observation notes focused on agreed aspects of the lesson; sometimes the beginning teacher creates a professional learning journal from which points for discussion are identified.

Secondly, mentors need to 'scaffold' the discussion. They can, for example, use critical moments in teaching and learning – or the lesson as a whole – to help the beginning teacher discuss broader themes about teaching and learning, or explore the 'big ideas' about relationships between school, individuals and society.

Finally, it is important to 'sustain' the learning conversation. Good mentors become aware of their tone of voice, keeping it neutral and curious to encourage open discussions. They create opportunities for their mentee to think back, think ahead and think laterally. The conversation is also sustained through finding meaning and value in it. The mentor and the beginning teacher need to work together to create a dynamic conversation in which there are opportunities to share problems, to pose and respond to questions, to extend thinking, to build solutions.

Mentoring can form part of the social glue between colleagues. It should support the emergence of a network of strong professional relationships which empower the new teacher to play an active role and to meet the needs of the school community. Conversations have a significant role in realising this potential.

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