

Research: how can coaching lead to school improvement?

New research shows coaching can lead to school improvement, write Rachel Lofthouse and Trista Hollweck, and hints at best bets to make that happen

As the new school year starts, there is a renewed interest in coaching for teachers and leaders, especially with many Early Career Framework (ECF) providers adopting coaching as a model for mentoring. But does the reality live up to the hype? Does teacher coaching lead to school improvement?

We define coaching in education to be a confidential, interpersonal and sustained dialogue-based practice in which the coach works with a coachee to facilitate self-reflection and effective decision making in the context of their own personal and professional challenges. Coaching allows current practices to be expanded and refined, and its advocates in education draw on research evidence to highlight how it improves student outcomes and enhances professional development.

But the term ‘coaching’ has come to encompass varied models and practices. A glance at social media shows there is no shortage of pre-packaged training and newly published books to support the profession’s appetite for quick results. In contrast, our research looked at the efficacy of what we term ‘contextual coaching’. We aimed to shed light on the nuances of coaching in specific education settings and to recognise the reciprocity of the relationship between coaching practices and school contexts.

Our paper, recently published in the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, drew on two examples of teacher coaching and sought to understand the extent to which they contributed to conditions for school improvement. The first was a DfE Strategic School Improvement Funding (SSIF) project for improving maths teaching and attainment through metacognitive teaching in ten primary schools. The second example was a large secondary school in Western Quebec, Canada. The former involved lead practitioners developing a bespoke coaching approach for their regular engagement with teachers. The latter saw all newly appointed teachers (regardless of prior teaching experience) working with a mentor-coach as part of the regional school board initiative.

The best evidence appears to support contextual coaching specifically

We collected data from each case through interviews, focus groups and documentation, and used Hargreaves and O'Connor's (2018) conceptual framework of collaborative professionalism for school improvement as the basis for our abductive analysis. Collaborative professionalism is an evidence-informed process that promotes solidarity among educators through the development of deeper relationships and ensures the solidity of the collaborative work's output through the use of precise protocols.

Our findings demonstrate that effective teacher coaching does lead to conditions that underpin school improvement. Specifically, the positive effect was most evident when there was alignment between the coaching approach and the tenets of collaborative professionalism. Coaching is, after all, founded on mutual dialogue, joint work, collective responsibility and collaborative inquiry –characteristics that suggest a collaborative working relationship between the coach and coachee.

But collective autonomy, collective initiative and collective efficacy among teachers take time to develop and embed. These were all more evident in the Canadian example, a sustained coaching programme that was funded for over a decade, than in the shorter-term SSIF programme.

Most importantly perhaps, the impact of coaching was enhanced in both cases as the programmes evolved through iterative design and co-construction by the participants, who made decisions based on their own contextual challenges and opportunities.

Our study also offers insight into how contextual coaching can lead to school improvement through the development of staff capacity for leadership. As coaches and coachees worked together, they expanded their coaching repertoire, engagement, competency and confidence. This had significance for their career development and helped to further embed contextual coaching in a positive feedback loop.

In the SSIF programme, both coaches and coachees took on new leadership roles in their schools or alliances because of their coaching experience. In the Canadian example, many coachees became mentor-coaches and even school principals.

So yes, coaching can lead to school improvement. But with more coaching being rolled out in schools, it is important to note that, although its principles can be generalised, the best evidence appears to support contextual coaching specifically, which means models must be developed in a bespoke fashion for (and with) each setting.