

Further reading

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Setting targets as a way of improving teaching

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AIM

To investigate the setting of targets as a means of improving the effectiveness of teachers.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ Statements about successful teaching can be broken into bite-sized components to help teachers identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- ★ Areas of weakness can be turned into specific targets through discussions with a mentor.
- ★ Effective setting of targets requires mentors to be skilled in analysis and negotiation.
- ★ The quality of teaching can be improved by coaching in skills relevant to the target areas.
- ★ Most teachers gained confidence in their ability to tackle problems.
- ★ Reducing teachers' actions to lists of components underestimates the complexity of teaching. Teachers' belief systems may be important, too.
- ★ Focusing on small aspects of practice depersonalised self-assessment and helped teachers become aware of subconscious behaviour. This helped teachers to feel more secure about making changes.
- ★ The stage between identifying weaknesses and finding useful strategies for improvement was problematic.
- ★ Mentors need high-quality training and support to coach effectively.
- ★ Systematic reflection about teaching was promoted, which was valued. In some cases reflection alone led to improvements in practice.

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Context

Improving the effectiveness of teachers is a major development priority for our school, a mixed comprehensive for 11–18 year olds. Our findings are based on the first phase of a project which took place in the five months preceding its OFSTED inspection.

The development priority

An outline of the development priority is provided to illuminate the research findings. We devised a procedure for improving our effectiveness as teachers. A forthcoming inspection provided the imperative for moving quickly. The development had four main components:

- ★ We consulted all teachers to produce 10 core statements describing effective teaching. We call these “our school’s quality standards for an ideal classroom”.
- ★ We produced a self-audit questionnaire to translate the school’s quality standards for teaching into their component parts. Every teacher completed this to identify three aspects of their teaching that they wanted to improve.
- ★ We devised a “structured dialogue” to guide mentors, who negotiated with teachers to translate the aspects of practice requiring improvement into specific targets with success criteria.
- ★ We identified core mentoring competencies and produced training and support for the mentor group throughout the project. The mentors observed lessons and provided feedback and coaching to help teachers reach their targets.

The project

Our teacher-effectiveness project was successful, increasing teachers’ confidence in their practice and their ability to tackle problems. Our evidence leads us to believe that, overall, there has been an improvement in teaching.

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The self-audit questionnaire was useful for promoting reflection on practice. The opportunity for reflection was valued. In a few cases this led to improvements. Every teacher felt the questionnaire was a valid reflection of our quality standards. We subsequently identified a few aspects of teaching relevant to the quality standards that were not included in the questionnaire.

Among the teachers’ comments were, “It is good to reflect on what you are doing, to set yourself short-term targets,” and, “It provided time to think about what I’m good at.”

The questionnaire reduced teacher behaviours into tiny components, and so was both highly reductionist and instrumental. By being made aware of aspects of their teaching that were perhaps subconscious, teachers found it easier to make changes to their practice. One teacher commented, “The fact there were so many positive statements to be made about yourself made it feel less critical!” Another said, “The nature of the tiny chunks in the self-audit made it less personal and less threatening.”

A disadvantage of the self-audit questionnaire was that it failed to take account of the complex and holistic nature of teaching, or of the importance of teachers’ belief systems.

Although most teachers found it useful for highlighting strengths and weaknesses, it was only successful as a mechanism for identifying targets for improvement in just over three-quarters of cases. It did not help teachers to produce a hierarchy of targets so that weaknesses in more basic competencies were tackled first.

Our evidence suggests that mentors were generally very successful at negotiating targets for improvement but needed to be better equipped to translate these into practical strategies. The mentors themselves felt that they needed more opportunities to practice the skills of analysis to translate teachers’ targets into tactics, and to set specific and measurable success criteria. The feedback and coaching given by mentors was valued, although lack of time was a problem.

“It is good to reflect on what you are doing, to set yourself short-term targets.”

“It gave a window for someone else to watch me – to give their reflection back,” was how one teacher described the process.

The mentor support meetings were valued for stimulating debate about pedagogy within the school’s management group. Mentors have acquired a common vocabulary that has enabled them to discuss teaching style without resorting to anecdote. Evidence from the early research activities highlighted the need for additional training of mentors in analysis and coaching.

The evidence for the findings

We identified two principal research questions for the project. These were whether the reductionist descriptions of teaching provided an appropriate basis for judgements about the quality of teaching; and to what extent the development priority, “improving teacher effectiveness”, had been successful in improving teaching in our school.

We adopted an action research approach and used the evidence to refine and shape the development priority as it progressed. All teachers completed a questionnaire about self-audits, and 40 per cent were interviewed to collect evidence about the effectiveness of setting targets and coaching. All mentors were surveyed through an initial questionnaire and later interviewed as a group. Three-quarters were interviewed individually in depth. Teachers’ action plans were scrutinised.

These activities provided evidence of strengths and weaknesses in both the needs analysis and the mentoring which took place. Mentors were asked whether their lesson observations indicated that teachers were working on appropriate targets and whether improvements had occurred by the end of the project.

The self-audit questionnaire was reissued to all teachers at the end of the project to provide data about teachers’ perceptions of their competence. One mentor kept a field diary of his involvement, which described his feelings about the morale and confidence of the mentor group and the rest of the staff as the project progressed.

Researching a development project

Research seeks to analyse events to establish valid relationships and to generalise from specifics. Our development priority was intended to improve effectiveness as teachers and create local conditions to facilitate change. We found some tensions in basing a research project on a development priority, especially as both had very tight timescales that were not well synchronised.

Our literature review helped us to identify the characteristics of successful teaching and learning. It made us aware that the design of the self-audit questionnaire may have been too pragmatic. The research did not attempt to identify and isolate the factors contributing to teachers’ effectiveness, since we were seeking specific knowledge about many aspects of our development priority. The evidence from the research was used to inform additional mentor training and will help us to plan the next stage of the development.

Next steps

We intend to extend the priority of development by developing coaching frameworks that attempt to describe the techniques that an “expert” teacher would use, or consider using, to deliver a lesson. We think that this will help mentors and teachers to identify strategies for improvement. Although still reductionist, it takes more account of the complex and holistic nature of teaching, in which many techniques are used intuitively. We shall extend our review of literature to consider the effect of teachers’ beliefs on various models of learning. Training for mentors will be reconsidered in light of this.

The comments from teachers included, “If this is not effective, it will not be the fault of the process. It has been manageable”, “The timescale was too short – more could be achieved over a longer period of time”, “This project was worthwhile. It should have been done years ago” and, “Relaunch the project soon to keep the motivation going.”

“The fact there were so many positive statements to be made about yourself made it feel less critical!”