
Instructional coaching – why it matters, and how to make it matter

By Harry Fletcher-Wood and Artur Taevere



Imagine a nine-year-old child sitting in a classroom, in almost any country in the world. How well she does at school – how well she is taught – matters. Effective teaching not only affects what she achieves at school (Slater et al., 2012), it also has far-reaching consequences. It increases her chances of attending a high-ranking university and saving for retirement – and decreases her chances of teenage pregnancy (Chetty et al., 2011). So, what can policymakers, school leaders and citizens do to increase her chances of having a teacher that is both confident and effective? This article explains how instructional coaching, as one form of effective professional development, has been implemented in Estonia.

What do we know about teacher professional development?

This question has generated a lot of thinking and evidence. But until recently, findings have been inconclusive. Reviewers have suggested the ‘features of professional development’ that are associated with success – such as sustained programmes or expert input (e.g. Cordingley et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). But we don’t know why – or even if – these features really help (Sims and Fletcher-Wood, 2021). For example, if we wanted to invite an expert to work with our teachers, for this intervention to be successful, we would first need to know what that expert does, and why what they do works. While many of these findings are concerned with high-income countries, the same problems are evident in research from low and middle-income countries. For example, we know that training at a central location is associated with lower impact (Popova et al., 2021) – but not why. We certainly can’t assume that moving the location of a training session will lead to greater impact.

A recent systematic review, funded by England’s Education Endowment Foundation, adopted a new approach to this problem (Sims et al., 2021). Reviewers assembled a sample of more than 100 randomised evaluations of teacher professional development interventions, and confirmed that many of studies noted one key finding – teacher professional development approaches, on average, do improve student learning. But it’s important to note that this is an average – some approaches have a powerful impact, while others make little difference.

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To find out why this was, the team looked at two areas: the **mechanisms** these professional development interventions adopted, and the broader **purposes** of professional development.

A mechanism is a technique to help people change what they think and do – it’s precise, observable and replicable. For example, collaboration – often cited as a valuable component of professional development – isn’t a mechanism. Collaboration isn’t precise enough to be a mechanism, because we don’t know what exactly the collaborators are doing and why. On the other hand, practical social support – where it is arranged for the teacher to benefit from practical advice from a buddy or colleague – is an example of a mechanism.

As a first step, the reviewers developed a list of **mechanisms** for which they could find promising evidence, including:

- setting goals
- modelling – demonstrating new teaching techniques
- feedback – on teacher practice
- encouraging repetition – to help form habits.

Next, they organised these mechanisms into four broader **purposes** of professional development.

- Promoting insights – for example, recognising the limits of students' working memories.
- Motivating goal-directed behaviour – for example, avoiding overloading students' memories.
- Teaching techniques – for example, breaking up instructions into smaller chunks.
- Embedding practice – for example, sticking at change long enough that it becomes a new habit.

So, what difference do mechanisms and purposes make?

Professional development was more likely to be effective if it included more evidence-based mechanisms to change behaviour. This seems logical, as professional development succeeds when it changes teaching practice. The more supports for change we have, the more likely we are to change. Setting a goal – like wanting to ask different types of questions in the classroom – can help. As can setting reminders – writing question suggestions on a lesson plan, for example. Lastly, having someone check in on lessons and providing feedback will also make us more likely to achieve the goal. The more mechanisms, the better.

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Moreover, **professional development was more likely to be effective if it addressed all four purposes** (as opposed to addressing three or fewer). Again, this seems logical – your practice will only change if you know what you want to do, why it should work, how to do it, and, ultimately, by sticking to it. If any of these ingredients are missing, the intervention is unlikely to work.

Introducing instructional coaching

Let's go back to the nine-year-old we began with. Consider her teacher. He's just a few years into his career, fully-qualified and wants to improve. How does he go about this? Who can help? He's done training courses in the past, but they tend to offer general principles and examples, and when he tries what they suggest, he often finds that things don't go to plan. What is he doing wrong? What should he do next? He retreats in confusion, not wanting to share his failures with the head teacher.

It's clear that this teacher needs ongoing support. Let's imagine how that could work. The training he attends could incorporate some type of ongoing coaching process, for example. Ideally, the coach would visit regularly, and identify things that are going well in lessons, and areas where the teacher could usefully make changes. If the teacher wants to ask better questions in class, the coach could give examples of powerful questions, help the teacher script and rehearse questions for the next lesson, and offer feedback to refine them.

This approach is often called instructional coaching. Unlike non-directive coaching (in which the teacher comes up with the answers), the coach's role is to guide and support the teacher to make powerful, lasting changes. There's promising evidence in favour of instructional coaching (Kraft et al., 2018) as well as promising individual programmes that utilise this approach (such as Allen et al., 2015).

The research findings around mechanisms and purposes help us to understand why instructional coaching can help to improve teaching. The underlying strength of this approach is that the coach is likely to adopt many mechanisms. In the example above, the teacher had a *goal*, *saw models*, *rehearsed*, was encouraged to *repeat* their actions and received *feedback*. We can easily imagine the coach also revisiting the teacher's prior learning, helping the teacher plan action and offering praise for the teacher's improvements. In this brief description, we have included eight of the 14 mechanisms that the previously mentioned systematic review identified – and all four purposes (Sims et al., 2021).

What's stopping us

'For every complex problem,' H.L. Mencken noted, 'there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong.' If instructional coaching is so great, why aren't we all doing it, all the time, already?

There are three crucial barriers to instructional coaching.

- **Time.** Coaching requires time for the coach to observe, and time for the coach and teacher to meet. Neither of these are easily achieved when teachers are already very busy. Understandably, teachers may be resistant to additional tasks.
- **Coaching expertise.** If coaching is to prove effective, the coach needs a good knowledge of both teaching and coaching. A coach who doesn't know how a teacher can improve – or can't persuade and support the teacher to make those improvements – is unlikely to be of much help.
- **Unfamiliarity.** Instructional coaching is new to most teachers. Some teachers may see its merits immediately, and enthusiastically welcome their coach's visits. Others may be more sceptical, and wonder what the coach knows, who they report to, how long the coaching will last, and why they have been singled out for attention.

Overcoming these barriers: the British Council in Estonia

In 2020, the British Council faced all three barriers when working with Estonia's Ministry of Education and Science, and the European Commission on an EU-funded reform support project to improve the country's system of professional development for teachers and school leaders. Indeed, Covid-19 put enormous time and pressure constraints on both teachers and coaches, and although coaching was a familiar concept in Estonia, there was little expertise in instructional coaching, so it was a new method for almost everyone involved.

Let's look at how the British Council attempted to overcome these barriers from the delivery and participant perspectives.

1) Make lesson observations and debrief meetings as efficient as possible

To overcome the first barrier – lack of time – the delivery team worked to improve the efficiency of observations and debrief meetings in partnership with Steplab, a UK-based organisation that helps teachers and schools implement high-quality instructional coaching. With their support, lesson observations not only became shorter – reducing from 30 to 45 minutes at the start of the project, to as little as 15 minutes – but also more focused.

Relationship-building was key. The master teachers who took on the role of instructional coaches were recruited from other schools in Estonia, so had no prior relationship with the teachers they were working with. But once the coaches became more familiar with the teacher and their classroom context, and developed relationships, observations could be conducted in a much shorter time.

As Liia Vijand-Lind, an instructional coach on the project, says: 'take the time to create a positive atmosphere and a trusting relationship with the teacher you are supporting. Then they are willing to open up and share with you what's really going on, instead of putting on a show.'

But shorter doesn't necessarily mean more useful. So, to ensure more effective observations, coaches used the tools on Steplab's online platform to conduct lesson observations in a more focused way. Beforehand, the coach and teacher would agree a single, specific action step, where the teacher could improve their practice (a small, granular aspect of teaching, as explained below). The lesson observation then focused primarily on how the teacher had implemented that specific technique, and what kind of impact it had on students.

Each lesson observation was followed by a debrief meeting, for the coach to provide feedback and model new teaching techniques, and for the teacher to practice these new techniques. Once everyone was comfortable with the process, debrief meetings could be conducted in 30 minutes.

Structuring coaching meetings

1) Praise: the coach provides positive feedback on one aspect of teaching that went well in the lesson, related to the action step that is agreed beforehand.



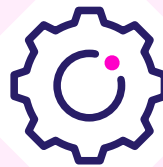
2) Probe: the coach and teacher discuss how the specific action taken by the teacher impacted on students and their learning.



3) Agree action step: the coach and teacher agree the next action step to focus on, and the coach models the new action step or teaching technique.



4) Plan and practice: the teacher practices the new action step, with support and advice from the coach.



These debrief meetings were made as efficient as possible by following a clear, four-part structure, proposed by Steplab.

- (1) **Praise:** the instructional coach provides positive feedback on one aspect of teaching that went well in the lesson, related to the action step that was agreed beforehand.
- (2) **Probe:** the coach and teacher discuss how the specific action taken by the teacher impacted on students and their learning.
- (3) **Agree action step:** the coach and teacher agree the next action step to focus on, and the coach models the new action step or teaching technique.
- (4) **Plan and practice:** the teacher practices the new action step, with support and advice from the coach.

Assuming lesson observations and debrief meetings are conducted once every two weeks, over a six-month period, this requires around ten hours of time for the coach and six hours for the teacher. While this is no insignificant amount, it is often much less than the alternative – travelling to external professional development programmes that can sometimes last for multiple days. Shorter observation and feedback meetings mean teachers and coaches can fit them into their busy working schedules.

2) Use practical tools to improve the quality of instructional coaching

Coaching is useful to the extent to which coaches are knowledgeable about both teaching and coaching. In Estonia, the project team recruited master teachers as coaches, who already had the highest level of teaching qualification available locally. Their teaching knowledge was complemented with bespoke coaching tools – customised in collaboration with researchers from Tallinn University and the University of Tartu, using the coaching tools that had been developed by Steplab over many years.

These tools included a library of hundreds of action steps – bite-sized changes for teachers to improve in a range of competencies. Some of these are outlined below.

- For a teacher who wants to improve their lesson planning by making the direction of the lesson clear to students, one action step could be: *ensure that the direction of learning is clear by sharing your objective with students at the start of the lesson. Explain it using as few words as possible and with clear, simple language.*
- For a teacher trying to better understand and address gaps in student knowledge, one action step could be: *plan your lessons around potential moments where students may make errors by identifying three*

to five misconceptions, mistakes or problems students are most likely to hold, develop or face at this point.

- For a teacher trying to ask more stretching questions, one action step could be: *encourage students to think hard and develop their answers by rewarding right answers with stretch questions. Ask a 'how' or 'why' question: 'right, how did you get to that answer?'*

(Used with permission from: Steplab)

Action steps offered coaches and teachers a shared language to talk about the nuances of teaching. Prior to the project, many teachers in Estonia felt they were expected to use modern, evidence-based teaching practices, as this had been the central priority of the long-term education strategy. However, they were not sure how exactly they should change their teaching to accommodate these practices. Coaching tools such as action steps, success criteria and practice tasks helped coaches and teachers have much more specific conversations about improving teaching.

Anne Aasamets, a master teacher and coach in the project, says: “[I] liked the content of the action steps, especially after this had been adapted to the Estonian context. This allowed me to provide quick and efficient feedback to the teacher, based on their unique ways of teaching.”

3) Clarity of purpose: supporting the teacher professional development

The final barrier addressed through the project was the unfamiliarity of instructional coaching. While some teachers embraced the approach from the beginning, others had concerns or, even, anxiety. Many had only experienced lesson observations within the context of performance management, or maybe the school principal or head of teaching and learning had only visited their classroom to check the quality of teaching.

The project team overcame this barrier by being entirely open about the purpose of instructional coaching at the beginning of the process. The coaches made it clear that their only role was to support the professional development of teachers; they were not in the classroom to judge their performance or criticise their actions. They tried to be as helpful as possible.

‘Teachers expected feedback that was very constructive, honest and non-judgmental,’ says coach Anne Aasamets. ‘As coaches, we should praise specific actions and highlight the strengths. One of the teachers I was supporting talked about her fears in the first meeting. At the end of the project, she was very satisfied. I had noticed specific behaviours that were worth praising – as well as opportunities for improvement.’

We normally think about instructional coaching as a way to help less-experienced teachers. But experienced teachers can also benefit from it – both as teachers and coaches. In Estonia, the coaches enjoyed the chance to think carefully about effective teaching and how to make improvements. As coach Liia Vijand-Lind, says: ‘when I analysed my lessons from the same perspective, it was a useful point of comparison, and it helped improve the quality of my own lessons too.’



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Conclusion

It's clear that our children's success in school and beyond depends on improvements to teaching. And while instructional coaching may not be the miracle cure, and making it work for teachers can be challenging, it has proven to be a powerful strategy, supported by promising research evidence. Not only can it help both teachers and coaches improve, most importantly, and as the British Council's experience in Estonia suggests, it can also be successfully implemented in contexts where the majority of teachers are unfamiliar with it.



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