

3.6 Role of the mentor

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Learning with and from a mentor helps teachers and leaders professional learning in various ways and can help them to take control of their own professional development. Through discussion and questioning, experienced colleagues can encourage teachers and school leaders to reflect on their learning and consider what it means for their own practice.

As a Programme Leader, you need to help teachers and leaders choose suitable mentors and support mentors to understand their role and responsibility. You may want to invite the mentors to a guided workshop session where you explore mentoring.

Having both mentors and mentees at the same session will ensure that everyone hears the same information and has a shared understanding of the mentoring programme. Cambridge has produced a guide for mentors to support your mentoring programme and you can download this from the Programme Leaders Group on the Professional Development Learning Community.

Slide 3 0:52 seconds

A PDQ mentor should be familiar with the syllabus and help the mentees identify what they want to achieve from the PDQ Programme. The mentor should meet regularly with their mentee to provide professional guidance, share experience and review and discuss progress, especially with the portfolio activities. The mentor should regularly observe the mentee providing formative feedback to aid their development and reflection. And the mentor should attend guiding sessions when invited to do so by the Programme Leader.

The mentors support the teacher or school leader throughout all the stages of the professional learning spiral. They stimulate reflection as well as encouraging and supporting teachers and school leaders to try new techniques and take risks.

Case Studies

7:18

How did working with an experienced colleague improve your practice?

Teacher 1

An experienced colleague is a wealth of knowledge. They are able to assist you not only in your teaching practice but also in the knowledge of content. When I've worked with experienced colleagues they've been able to assist me in getting from point A to point B because when you're teaching, often it is difficult to break down the big picture into smaller steps especially when you're trying to achieve something extremely complex. The best example I can think of would be a series of science lessons and I was teaching content that I

3.6 Role of the mentor

didn't feel very confident in teaching. I consulted an experienced colleague about that content and she was able to let me see how I could break it into small lessons and ultimately the children achieved the learning outcome.

Teacher 2

When I worked with an experienced colleague I was paired up with him for a year and so on and off we would plan lessons together and he would come in and observe and give feedback. It helped my practice in several ways. First of all, it gave me fresh ideas in ways of generating activities for students to learn from and improve their learning from and it also improved my awareness of what was going on in the classroom and how I could do things differently.

Teacher 3

When I first started I had a really experienced head of department. I was science teacher in a secondary school and he had a fantastic way of making quite difficult scientific concepts come alive and just by watching him teach and seeing the great things that he did gave me the confidence to try them in my own lessons.

What qualities should a mentor have and why?

Teacher 1

An experienced colleague should be someone who is approachable, someone you feel comfortable to ask for assistance but also somebody who has empathy with your situation, somebody who can reflect on their practice and tell you of a time when they experienced something similar. In that way you feel supported because you know they're coming from a place that is relative to the way you are but you also feel that you can progress and become an even better teacher because they can give you the advice that they had gained from working through their experiences.

I think an experienced colleague should also be somebody who's not judgemental and very supportive and that provides you with guidance but also checks back with you and gets feedback from you about how you've progressed because in every sense teaching is a collaborative activity and everyone's ideas are valued and you might gain something very interesting for them in the future.

Teacher 2

3.6 Role of the mentor

I think that the experienced colleague should have an air that you can confide in them. You need to know you can trust this person and if something goes wrong that you're not going to be in trouble for it because ultimately if you feel like that then you'd be stressed in your lessons and it won't be true reflection on how you get on with your class and how you teach.

The experience that teacher also needs to be in somewhat of a coach, they need to be able to develop you as a teacher rather than develop you as a teacher in their image and so you need to be asking you questions rather than telling you how.

Teacher 3

I think the qualities of an experienced colleague need are of two different aspects. First of all they need to be confident. You have to feel like you know what it is that they are talking about but they also have to be able to empathise with what it's like when you first starting your profession or when is pedagogy that you're not sure about.

How have you supported a less experienced colleague?

Teacher 1

To support the less experienced colleague I invite them in to some of my lessons. They were new to teaching at the time so they were taking over some of my classes and so they could get a feel for the students and how they operate as a group when I taught them. Then when they were teaching a class I was observing and giving them feedback. One of the important things when we are trying to support a less experienced teacher is to not overburden them. If you see twenty different things that you don't like in a lesson or don't think are good enough it's not the time to mention all twenty. It's a case of pick the top two or the top three that should be worked on. So if it's behaviour or if it's differentiation or pace it's important to focus on one thing to get it right and then move to the next.

Teacher 2

A couple of years ago I was helping a less experienced English teacher in a primary school and she was specifically looking for help around behaviour management so what we did was sat down first of all together and we explored some possible techniques that she could try out in her lessons. I then went to observe her and actually see what those were looking like in practice and then we followed up the observation with another discussion about what she thought was working and what she thought we need to work on next to improve.

3.6 Role of the mentor

How did being a mentor help your own professional development?

Teacher 1

Being an experienced colleague helped my own professional development in several ways. The first is that it gives me a fresh insight into my own teaching and my subject understanding from a different perspective, which is refreshing. It gives you ideas of how you could do things with your lessons, what difference, what way can you do things differently and at times you can get time saving tips. How can we mark books more efficiently? How can we give better feedback in little or no extra time? It's a case of seeing what you can usefully incorporate into your own routine.

Teacher 2

I think as an experienced colleague when you're supporting somebody that's less experienced it really makes you reflect upon your own practice. As you're watching the less experienced colleague you tend to think about what it's that you do and it really just acts as a mirror almost to your own pedagogy.