

Collaborative practice insight three: People and skills

About this document

This one of a series of research-informed briefs which bring together learning from Education Development Trust's School Partnership Programme (SPP).

SPP is a partnership-based approach to school improvement that has worked collaboratively with over 1,300 schools. Through the programme, groups of schools build capacity and capability in effective school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support and improvement.

These research-informed briefs report what school partnerships have discovered about working together through peer review and how their experience compares with wider research findings.

This brief explores the skills and attributes that practitioners have found most useful to enable them to conduct peer review effectively.

'The strength of the peer review process,' says Liz Robinson, 'is that it enables school leaders to have different kinds of conversations together.'

By 'different', Liz means 'difficult'. She means the kinds of conversations that friends and colleagues often avoid.

Liz, who now leads a Multi-academy Trust in south London, speaks from experience. In her previous role as a headteacher, she was a frequent visitor to a colleague's school. She had noticed things that raised questions for her.

'I never said anything or asked those questions because I thought I was in "supportive mode"; she says. 'I just assumed my colleague was getting the challenge they needed from elsewhere and so I just steered round potentially awkward questions.'

The reality, however, was different.

'It actually turned out that the colleague was being neither challenged nor supported in a way that was helping them. And then Ofsted arrived and the school was downgraded to "Requires Improvement". My colleague lost the confidence of their governing body – and consequently their job.'

'The experience had a profound effect on me,' Liz adds. 'I vowed then that if I ever had any questions or concerns about a school, I would voice them.'

Liz reflects that school leaders often feel that they lack the confidence to have challenging conversations with one another. Even the most successful leaders in their own schools find that it requires different skills to provide effective challenge to a peer. They worry about damaging their relationships with colleagues, or that they simply can't find an appropriate way to voice concern about another leader's school.

'Peer review legitimises a different set of conversations,' says Liz. 'The process provides both the content and the structure for a discussion. It provides leaders

with the space and the capabilities for a challenging professional exchange. It's empowering.'

Michael Rowland, headteacher of Thornhill School in Dewsbury, has been on both sides of the peer review discussion – when being reviewed and as a reviewer. His school is part of the Focus Multi-academy Trust, which straddles the Pennines from Greater Manchester to West Yorkshire. When his Trust adopted the SPP process, he was the first headteacher to volunteer for a school review.

Michael believes that headteachers on both sides of the peer review relationship need to adopt particular skills and attitudes to get the most from the process.

'As the host of a review, you need to move out of the "showcasing" mode that heads are often forced to adopt,' says Michael. 'The peer review process is entirely different.'

'If peer review is going to be helpful, you need to be honest and open about your school's performance in order to get some useful feedback.'

Critically, says Michael, headteachers need to model that openness with their teams, too.

'For your school's staff, the peer review process can feel a bit strange,' he notes. 'You need to let them know that it is not about trying to produce a "show lesson" just for the reviewers. That means getting out of the Ofsted mindset. You need to help staff embrace the process.'

'It's about modelling behaviours that demonstrate an openness to learn. That means being open about

vulnerabilities and concerns, without fear that it will be used against you.'

When he became a reviewer, Michael found he needed different skills and attitudes again.

'As a reviewer, you need to embrace the coaching model,' he says. 'The SPP training is really useful to help you get into that.'

Overall, Michael felt he has learned a lot from being a lead reviewer.

'You need to spend time understanding the context of the school you are reviewing. If you already have familiarity with the schools and the people, I found that helps.'

'You need to be able to synthesise the findings and reflections from the review team, quickly. Being able to summarise at the end of the review day in order to give feedback is really challenging to do – but really rewarding when you do it well.'

Michael stresses the need to set the right tone for the review team. *'We're not there to judge, but to offer feedback on a specific issue. As leader, you have to keep the team focused on the brief. You need to take on the views of the review team – and remember that your conclusions should be based on fact, not opinion.'*

Above all, he says, the whole team should be courteous at all times. An effective peer review relationship is built on mutual respect.

'Respect is not deference. It is often the quality that enables leaders to take on those so-called "difficult" conversations.'

The GROW coaching model

The **GROW model** is one of the most widely-used goal-setting and problem-solving models. It provides a simple and methodical framework for four main stages of a **coaching** session.

G stands for **goal**. Through questioning, the coach helps the coachee to define what they want to achieve. It should be a specific measurable outcome.

R stands for **reality**. The coach invites the coachee to define where they are now. What is the reality of their current situation?

O stands for **options**. The coach helps the coachee to identify options for action. What could they do to move closer to their goal? In some cases, O can also be an opportunity to consider **obstacles**. What are the barriers to progression?

W stands for **will**. At this stage, the coachee determines a way forward – the actions they will undertake. They may prepare a plan and/or define the support they need.

Whitmore, 2002

Lean in – and expect a positive outcome

Writing in the Harvard Business Review, author Joel Garfinkle offers some straightforward advice to leaders preparing for a direct conversation with senior colleagues. The key, he says, is respect.

'Lean into the conversation with an open attitude and a genuine desire to learn,' suggests Garfinkle. 'Start from a place of curiosity and respect – for both yourself and the other person. Genuine respect and vulnerability typically produce more of the same: mutual respect and shared vulnerability. Even when the subject matter is difficult, conversations can remain mutually supportive. Respect the other person's point of view, and expect them to respect yours.'

Garfinkle sets out some helpful pointers for reviewers facing a potentially uncomfortable conversation with a peer headteacher.

Start by focusing on what you're hearing, not what you're saying, he suggests.

'People who shy away from conflict often spend a huge amount of time mentally rewording their thoughts. Although it might feel like useful preparation, ruminating over what to say can hijack your mind. And tough conversations rarely go as planned anyway. So take the pressure off yourself. You don't actually need to talk that much during a difficult conversation. Instead, focus on listening, reflecting, and observing. Listen. Pause. Be interested and proactive. Gather as much detail as possible. Ask questions without blame.'

Next, says Garfinkle, be direct.

'Address uncomfortable situations head-on by getting right to the point. Have a frank, respectful discussion where both parties speak frankly about the details of an issue. Talking with people honestly and with respect creates mutually rewarding relationships, even when conversations are difficult.'

There are situations, however, where cultural or personality differences should be considered, he advises. If the prevailing culture is conflict avoidant or doesn't value directness, you can still engage in challenging conversations. In these cases, shift your approach from overly direct to a respectful, affirming back-and-forth conversation.

For instance, if the person you are talking with seems to not be picking up on what you are saying, encourage them to repeat their understanding of what you've shared. This communication style is open and less threatening.

Finally, expect a positive outcome.

Don't let yourself think: this is going to be a disaster. Instead, tell yourself: this will result in an improved relationship.

Garfinkle says: *'Focus on the long-term gains that the conversation will create for the relationship. When your attention is focused on positive outcomes and benefits, it will shift your thinking process and inner dialogue to a more constructive place.'*

Improvement Champions: building ownership

Just as headteachers have developed new skills by being involved in the SPP peer review process, so too have Improvement Champions (ICs). They build on the review process by enabling staff to turn its findings into practical improvements.

Joanna Loomes and Dawn Simpson are two such ICs. They are both teachers in schools within the Pathfinder Schools Partnership. Joanna puts her finger on the key difference between her everyday job in the Trust and her role as an Improvement Champion.

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'In my day job, as SEND lead across two schools in the Trust, I am often thrown into the role of "fixer". I am very solutions-focused. As an Improvement Champion, however, I have to resist that urge to be the one who jumps in with an answer. The IC role is about enabling other people to come up with solutions to their own problems. It means really listening to what staff are saying and helping them to make decisions.'

Dawn agrees. *'When you work with a school, people need to see that you are there to support and help – not to tell them what to do. That means being able to stand back and also to question; not just to offer answers. You can use your experience to empathise with teachers – and that really helps. But don't offer solutions.'*

Joanna and Dawn are describing the essence of an Improvement Workshop. Informed by the school review, it is a process of professional learning. It is not an isolated exercise in old-style professional development.

Academic, Helen Timperley, argues that the shift from professional development to professional learning is essential for lasting school improvement. She was among the first to argue for a transformation in teacher development to make it more effective – a cause now

Improvement champions have experience in school improvement and are able to:

- lead aspects of the partnership's school improvement work, including facilitation of post-peer review improvement workshops
- through facilitating this workshop, help schools to identify and facilitate evidence-based approaches that will bring about rapid and sustained school improvement
- help the partnership to track its peer review and impact evidence base to enable it to hold itself to account
- link with other ICs in the partnership and beyond to draw on expertise and experience in evidence-informed school improvement.

taken up with great vigour by organisations like the Teacher Development Trust.

To move from professional development to professional learning, Timperley argued that key shifts in thinking and behaviour are required. They make a useful checklist for Improvement Champions.

The first shift is to think of teacher development in terms of professional learning. Timperley explains: *'Over time, the term "professional development" has taken on connotations of delivery of some kind of information to teachers in order to influence their practice, whereas "professional learning" implies an internal process in which individuals create professional knowledge.'*

What attributes does an Improvement Champion need?

Lucy Shaw is an Improvement Champion in the Focus Multi-academy Trust. She works at Shibden Head Primary School, near Halifax. She thinks that Improvement Champions need four key attributes.

1. Commitment. 'You need to be committed enough to invest time finding out about the school you are working with so that you can add value. For example, when we were working with a school focused on improving reading, we found out what books they were reading and then we read them all. We wanted to understand their context and setting.'

2. Approachability. 'I try always to remember that I am giving an impression in the first five minutes. I never want people to feel afraid or to worry that they might say the wrong thing. My job is to encourage staff to open up and ask questions that they might not have asked. It's about being a friendly face, but also about giving constructive criticism in a way that people feel able to take on board.'

3. Patience. 'On one occasion, as well as doing a workshop, I worked with people in two-hour slots throughout the day. Afterwards I felt we'd really succeeded in helping teachers build their skills. It's about being there for people.'

4. Dedication. 'I think you need to be generous in the way you give your time. Sometimes you need to go above and beyond.'

'Challenging assumptions' and 'meaning-making' are essential activities for professional learning, says Timperley.

The second shift is to put students at the centre of the process. Improvements in student learning must be the central purpose, says Timperley. 'Students must be the touchstone and the reason for teachers to engage, the basis for understanding what needs to change and evaluating whether those changes have been effective.'

Third, professional learning focuses on knowledge and skills that are both practical (to address immediate challenges) and understood in a way that enables them to be applied flexibly in response to future challenges.

Fourth, says Timperley, professional learning is a process of systematic enquiry.

You don't have to look too hard to see Timperley's

ideas reflected in the SPP peer review process.

At each stage, participants are encouraged to challenge assumptions, with Improvement Champions (in particular) working with staff teams to make meaning of the results.

Rooted in a review of current practice, student outcomes are always at the centre.

Working together, teachers are guided through an enquiry process to identify the skills and knowledge that they need to improve.

Dawn, Joanna and their Improvement Champion colleagues also apply the principles of professional learning to their practice. *'As ICs, we need to constantly reflect to improve,'* says Joanna. *'We meet as a team to look at what has worked and what hasn't. We need to be reflective and happy to change our approach. Just*

because something works well with one group, doesn't mean to say that it always will.'

Both Dawn and Joanna say that the skills they have developed as Improvement Champions have made them more effective in their everyday jobs, too.

'The tools we were given as part of the SPP training are really helpful,' Joanna continues. *'I use them in staff meetings – not just in Improvement Workshops.'*

Dawn goes further. *'The skills and tools I have developed as an IC have helped me be more confident in presentations and working with staff groups,'* she says. *'They have really helped me in situations where I have wanted to change something by building ownership of*

solutions among staff themselves. It has helped avoid staff groups feeling "done to". Now, staff are leading the change themselves.'

Joanna feels that the introduction of peer review has helped the Trust as a whole to better utilise the expertise that always existed within the group of schools.

Dawn sums it up: 'We've gone from being friends, to being critical friends.'



Understanding – and overcoming – barriers

Through hard work, the team at Pathfinder Schools has established a positive culture of professional learning. But what happens when that does not already exist within a partnership of schools? What happens when staff perceive an invitation to an Improvement Workshop as, at best, an irritation, or at worst a threat? What skills and attributes does an Improvement Champion need then?

First, they must understand the nature of the challenge.

David Weston and Bridget Clay have written extensively about teacher learning – and the factors that often prevent it. Frequently, they suggest, our innate biases as human beings get in the way of professional learning.

Confirmation bias leads people to explain everything using their existing models. We dismiss, diminish or reject information that does not fit with our view – and we over-emphasise information which confirms our view.

So-called ‘sunk-cost bias’ leads us to develop an unshakeable belief in the things we have worked hardest on. We don’t want to let go of work we are deeply invested in.

Meanwhile the Dunning-Kruger effect is cognitive bias where those with just a little bit of knowledge feel misplaced confidence in this knowledge and superiority, compared to those with more knowledge.

All of these biases lead people to stick with what they know.



To make matters worse for would-be Improvement Champions, other biases can lead people to feel disposed to reject new ideas.

For example, people tend to assume that any disagreement is likely to be a character flaw in the other person. When you make an error, it is an honest mistake; when another person makes an error, it is because they are careless or misguided. This is called 'fundamental attribution error'.

When these biases are combined within a group of people, social bonds and peer pressures can multiply their effects. People overvalue the views of people they like, and undervalue the views of those they dislike. In the presence of an outsider, some groups with strong social bonds may take refuge in their own group.

How does an Improvement Champion encourage professional learning in the face of such potentially unfavourable conditions?

Helen Timperley offers advice.

First, she says, it is a myth to think that you are better working with a group of willing volunteers if you want to encourage professional learning. In fact the evidence from studies of professional learning and development shows that the outcomes for students were no better or worse if teachers volunteered or were required to participate. That is because willing volunteers can join in with no genuine expectation that they will change their practice as a result, while those required to participate can unexpectedly become motivated to adopt change when presented with evidence.

Timperley advises learning facilitators to keep students' needs at the centre of enquiry and discussion. *'If, as commonly happens,'* she says, *'the introduction to a particular professional learning focus begins with new approaches to teaching and learning rather than analysing students' needs, resistance is more likely to arise.'*

Sometimes the challenge is to disrupt existing thinking to encourage enquiry.

'When a professional learning facilitator introduces theories that are in competition with those of the teachers, the issue can become one of whose theory is better. The question that needs to be addressed to resolve competing theories is, how will students benefit?'

Timperley offers facilitators some useful tactics to manage competing theories successfully.

Assemble relevant evidence. Include teachers' current theories of practice. *'(Ask teachers) what they consider to be effective and how they feel about having their theories challenged. What do they disagree with? What do they agree with?'*

Adopt an enquiry habit of mind yourself as well as encouraging teachers to do likewise. *'Framing resistance as competing theories is more likely to lead to enquiry habits of mind than framing resistance as not wanting to change,'* advises Timperley.

Set a tone of respect and challenge – which means taking teachers' existing theories seriously. Facilitators should ask what is leading a teacher to hold a particular theory? What is the evidence for it? Conclusions should be drawn on the basis of the impact on student outcomes.

Finally, access expertise. *'Ideally, which the teachers perceive to be relevant,'* says Timperley. Sometimes the challenge is to disrupt existing thinking to encourage enquiry.

Lucy Shaw puts this into practice. Enquiry is at the heart of her approach.

'Being an IC has really helped me sharpen my questioning skills,' she says. 'It's not about giving answers, it about asking the right questions which leads the group to its own solutions. It's hard at first, but once you start, it comes quite naturally. It's about respecting the differences in other schools and helping them find a solution that works in their context – not trying to transplant what you do in your school, to theirs.'

'As an Improvement Champion, I have learned never to assume things and always to be flexible. You are part of the process of enabling teachers to develop. You work together to help the teachers be the best that they can be.'

Avoiding personal bias

Peer reviewers and Improvement Champions must guard against their own personal bias – as much as challenge the bias of others. There is good evidence that people's assessment of new evidence is biased by their prior beliefs. That means we all tend to seek out confirmatory information to support a hypothesis we already held prior to an enquiry; and then to overvalue such confirmatory information.

In a peer review context, school leaders can unconsciously look for evidence of 'what I know works well in my own school' as opposed to 'what isn't working in this school and how might it be better?'

Brief 4 in this series, 'Gathering and Using Evidence', considers this in more detail and explores ways of countering unconscious bias.

Scary and rewarding

Back in Michael Rowland's school in Dewsbury, Zoe Young is also an Improvement Champion within the Focus Multi-academy Trust. She is the first to admit that the IC role can seem daunting at first.

'Lots of things are scary about the IC role,' admits Zoe. 'You are going into a completely different school where you don't know anybody. That automatically takes you out of your comfort zone.'

'I had lots of uncertainties at the beginning, but as I went through the IC training, my confidence grew. I realised that my role is to help teachers develop their own way forward to improve and I didn't need to be an expert in everything.'

She stresses the importance of reading the dynamics of a workshop and not being afraid to change course if needed.

'You must be a good listener. You have to listen to the way the session is going and be flexible. You might have a beautifully planned workshop, but you need to be ready to change tack if the group takes a different route.'

Zoe has taken Helen Timperley's core piece of advice to heart: to put students at the centre. Her moral purpose is palpable.

'Being an Improvement Champion can be challenging, but you're doing the role because you want to. You're not paying lip service. You want to help secure improvements for children – and that is powerful. You feel a real responsibility. You want it to be worthwhile for the school.'

Zoe feels that her task is made easier by the fact that she is able to develop a relationship with the school over the long term. In her Trust, Improvement Champions are part of the whole SPP process, from the initial peer review to the post-workshop progress checks.

'In each school I have worked with, I have been back and done the 90 day reviews,' says Zoe. 'In each case, I met the local IC and we talked through what had happened since the workshop. It was nice to see how it had developed. We also talked about what was next, so the process was ongoing.'

Is such a 'scary' role worth it? 'Yes,' says Zoe. 'I have grown a lot,' she says.

She has enjoyed working across the Trust to make a wider impact; it's given her a new outlook. 'It has made me think that I'd like to take my career further and do even more,' adds Zoe.

Shaping a system

The Focus Multi-academy Trust, of which Zoe is a part, covers 15 diverse primary schools. Its Chief Executive is Helen Rowland. Asked about the role of the Improvement Champions across the Trust as a whole, she buzzes with enthusiasm.

'It was the Improvement Champions that really interested me about the SPP process,' she says, 'because they take the process of school improvement and extend it beyond just our principals as the drivers.'

Helen continues: *'We appoint our ICs for just one year, so as not to overburden them and also to keep the process fresh. There is no payment for the role – no TLRs – but as time has passed more staff are putting themselves forward to be an Improvement Champion. Now it is something that staff highly value as a professional development opportunity.'*

'As an Improvement Champion, staff get to see things that they normally wouldn't. They go into two other academies, work with headteachers – and in our case, the ICs are also involved in the peer review visits themselves. There is a lot of trust placed in them when they deliver the improvement workshops.'

Helen believes that the peer review process is making a difference beyond the support it provides to specific areas of school improvement; it is building staff capacity and capability across the Trust as a whole.

'Some of our teams – headteachers and ICs – have said that being involved in the process has been some of the best professional development they have had. What they have learned about themselves – personally and professionally – is as valuable as what they have learned about their schools.'

What appeared 'scary' at first sight to staff, and disruptive to established ways of working, has proved a worthwhile investment.

Helen's experience suggests that when school partnerships get it right, they can experience a multiplier effect from the individual benefits of the peer review process.

The skills that peer reviewers develop to lead enquiries in other schools also makes them more effective in their own. The practice that ICs develop to lead improvement workshops also benefits their own day-to-day practice, as well as supporting their career development and their own school's succession planning. Rolled together, these benefits make individual schools stronger and their partnership as a whole more effective, creating a virtuous circle.

Back in south London, Liz Robinson believes that peer review has changed the way that their group of schools interact and share knowledge. The process has built and strengthened relationships and changed the atmosphere.

'It is so heartening to see how it has boosted confidence,' she says.

'Once people realise that it's not about putting people under the cosh and judging them, you can see them open up and recognise that they can all add value. It's generated a new spirit: that we're all here to learn from one another.'

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