Ambition Institute

THE EXPERT EDIT:

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

GENEVIEVE FIELD

KEEP GETTING BETTER

ABOUT US

WHO WE ARE

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds don't do as well as their peers at school.

We know that improving teaching and school leadership is the best way to address this gap. No other aspects of the school system have as much influence on pupil achievement, particularly the achievement of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ambition Institute has one purpose: to help educators serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds to keep getting better.

WHAT WE DO

At Ambition Institute we help schools tackling educational disadvantage to keep getting better, and help their teachers and school leaders to become more expert over time. That's how we'll make sure every child gets a great education and the best possible start in life.

> **We train** teachers and leaders at all levels to get better at the things that make the biggest difference: what you teach, how you teach it, and how you create the conditions for schools to thrive.

> **We share** what works. Everyone can benefit from evidence of how great teaching and leadership can improve schools and change lives, so we connect people to the latest research and the best practice out there in the system.

> **We champion** every teacher and school.

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FOREWORD FROM JOSH GOODRICH

There's no denying it: teaching is tough. If keeping a class full of students motivated and learning wasn't challenging enough, we also need to worry about maintaining our own continuous improvement. All of us recognise that to keep getting better is vital for the students we teach, yet this can feel elusive.

The challenge of ensuring continued improvement is of particular relevance at the moment. We've emerged from a period where our development may have taken a back seat to other, more pressing concerns. All of us, particularly those early in our careers, and all of our students, have missed countless opportunities to learn.

Now more than ever, we need rapid, sustained improvement for every teacher, in every school. It's unsurprising then that there's been a renewed interest in the potential of instructional coaching to provide a solution.

In response to the daily challenges of teaching, instructional coaching is all about making change easy and achievable. Through focusing on regular, incremental improvement, it can help to cut through the noise of the classroom and focus our minds on getting better, one manageable step at a time. With an emphasis on the use of deliberate practice, it aims not only to change what we know, but what we do in the classroom.

As a teacher, a key issue for me was the fact that the training I received rarely matched what I needed at that stage in my development. To borrow a phrase from Goldilocks and the Three Bears, I wanted help working on things that were "just right" for me and my students.

This is what instructional coaching offers: bespoke professional development and solutions for the challenges that we face at every stage of our journey towards expertise.

Josh Goodrich
Founder and CEO, Steplab
@josh_CPD

Josh Goodrich is founder and CEO of Steplab and Powerful Action Steps. He is a former MAT teaching and learning lead, school leader, teacher trainer and English teacher.

AN INTRODUCTION FROM GENEVIEVE FIELD

Instructional coaching is a powerful tool with the potential to transform teacher development.

Renewed interest in this style of coaching couldn't have come at a better time, with the attainment gap impacting the lives of many disadvantaged pupils, affecting their learning, job prospects and life chances.

There has never been a more pressing need to evolve effective professional development for teachers and leaders.

Notably, this is not a problem found only in schools assessed by Ofsted as performing poorly – the gap is as large in schools rated 'Outstanding' as it is in schools rated 'Inadequate' (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018).

So, what makes the biggest difference in addressing this gap? Having an expert teacher in every classroom, in a school led by expert leaders.

At Ambition, we want to provide teachers and school leaders with quality professional development, so they have the knowledge, skills and expertise to improve their schools and provide their pupils with what they need to succeed.

This is not guesswork – a recent study conducted with the Education Policy Institute (EPI) found that high-quality CPD can improve pupil outcomes as effectively employing a teacher with 10 years' classroom experience. Furthermore, studies have shown that in settings providing high-quality CPD teachers are far less likely to leave the sector or move schools (Zuccolo & Fletcher-Wood, 2020).

We know that there is no single right answer in professional development – but we do think it's possible to make some 'best bets' on approaches.

Instructional coaching has a better evidence base than any other form of CPD, which is why we use it as a cornerstone to several of our programmes.

But the definition of the approach can be muddy and there are misconceptions across the sector. That's why we've created this journal, to act as handrail for those getting to grips with the practice.

Genevieve is our Director of Programmes at Ambition Institute. She recently led on the early roll-out and post-covid expansion of the DfE funded Early Career Framework (ECF) programme across England. She was the Head of Teacher Training at Ark and is a former teacher and tutor.

The following extracts aim to shed light on instructional coaching and provide reflective points for you to consider how to make the best use of this powerful method in developing expertise in your school:

> **Teacher Coaching in a Simulated Environment:** A brief extract which adds evidence to the effects of deliberate practice in teacher education courses. It shows that practice opportunities can enhance the development of candidates' skills and beliefs far more effectively than simple reflection.

> **Habit Formation Limits Growth in Teacher Effectiveness:** Whilst re-emphasising that habitual control of behaviour in classrooms is not necessarily a bad thing, in this extract the authors argue that rigidity of formed habits can inhibit teacher development.

> **Parsing the Practice of Teaching:** Mary Kennedy argues that to help novice teachers, we need to focus less on the actions we see, and instead develop a more sophisticated understanding of what teachers do. Kennedy proposes five persistent problems and suggests they can be used as a framework.

Something else we are considering that isn't featured in this journal is Jim Knight's argument that whilst instructional coaches need to be deeply versed in the practices they share, teachers also need autonomy to make decisions for themselves.

Thank you to the original authors and contributors of the papers from which these extracts are taken. Through research like this, we can continue to make the best bets on teaching practice, backed by the evidence available to us.

Genevieve Field
Director of Programmes, Ambition Institute

WHAT IS INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING?

Instructional coaching involves a more expert teacher helping another teacher to develop their practice with individual classroom-based observational feedback. Coaches focus on bite-sized pieces of feedback and provide specific steps that the teacher can take to develop their expertise through regular coaching over time.

The principles of instructional coaching are linked to the principles of developing expertise in any domain through the use of deliberate practice. The first step is to identify a destination or outcome, often called the target performance.

Teachers can move from their current performance towards this target performance by practising a sequence of sub-goals with the aid of a coach. This allows them to overcome existing ingrained habits and adopt new behaviours. The input of the coach is in observing the practitioner's current performance, setting precise sub-goals and designing practice.

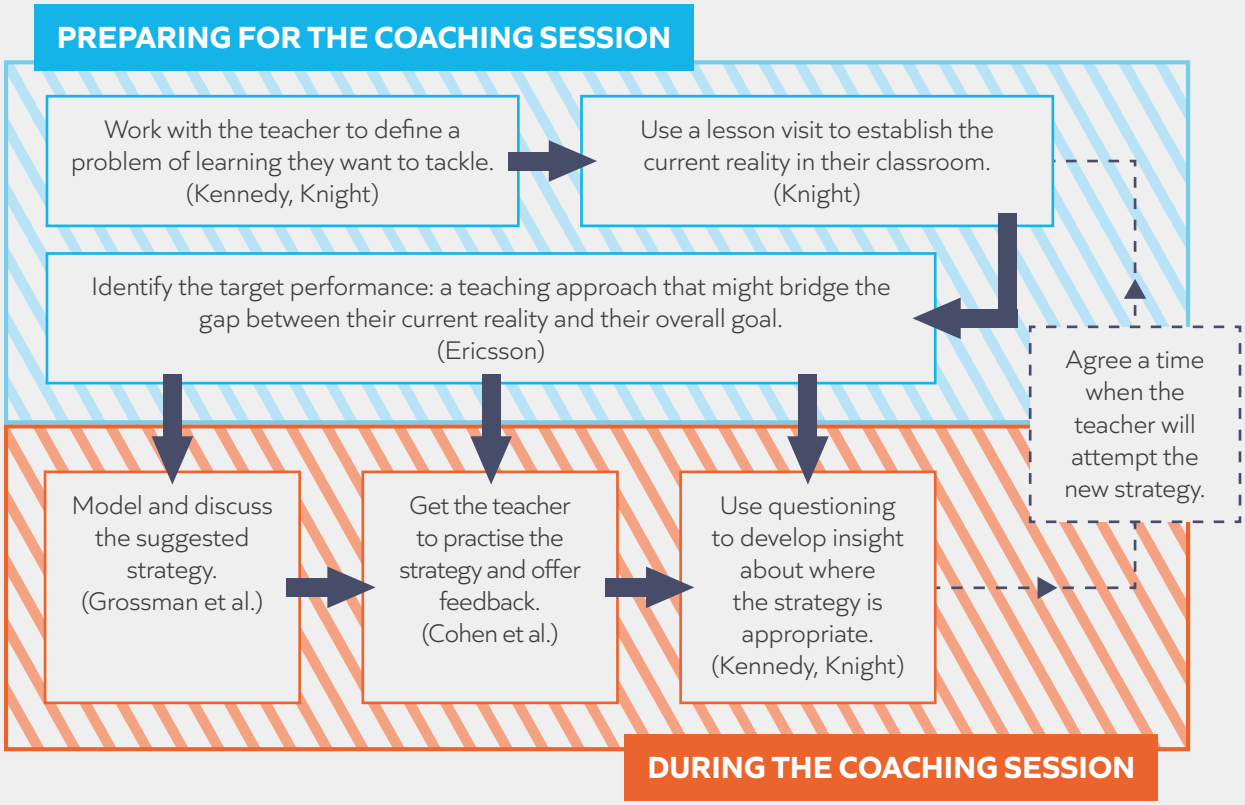
This is in sharp contrast with traditional approaches to classroom observation which are largely about judging the effectiveness of a teacher.

Instructional coaching is also in contrast to a more traditional coaching model where the coach asks a series of open questions in order to draw out the answer that the practitioner is already aware of.

Instructional coaching assumes that there are some areas where the teacher being coached is more novice and that the coach, being more expert, will be able to guide their improvement in those areas.

This applies equally well to all teachers, although early career teachers probably benefit from a more structured coaching curriculum, whilst more experienced teachers can have more input into the focus of their coaching.

Steve Farndon
Fellow, Ambition Institute
@wheninclass



EXTRACT ONE

TEACHER COACHING IN A SIMULATED ENVIRONMENT

Author: Cohen J, Wong V, Krishnamachari A, Berlin R.
Source: Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis

A brief extract which adds evidence to the effects of deliberate practice in teacher education courses. It shows that practice opportunities can enhance the development of candidates' skills and beliefs far more effectively than simple reflection.

As in the professional development literature (Allen et al., 2011; Kraft et al., 2018), we find that coaching can be a powerful treatment for improving teaching in the preservice period. In this way, our findings reinforce a wide literature on the development of expertise; candidates need outside support and coaching to make practice "deliberate" in ways that maximize its utility (for a summary, see Ericsson & Pool, 2016). While this well-documented in other professions, there is scarce systematic work on the causal effects of deliberate practice in teacher education courses. These data provide preliminary evidence that focusing on such practice opportunities across preparation experiences could enhance the development of candidates' skills and beliefs.

These data also indicate that repeated practice opportunities alone may not improve teaching as efficiently and effectively as coaching between sessions, and that absent outside support, self-reflection can have potentially deleterious effects. While it may seem unsurprising that coached candidates improved much more than those who only self-reflected, the premise that reflection is a sufficiently powerful lever for improvement is central to much literature on teacher preparation (Calderhead & Gates, 2003; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Hatton & Smith, 1995) and is, in fact, the primary skill assessed in consequential teacher licensure exams such as edTPA (Sato, 2014).

This study tells a distinct story about the potential value of reflection, on the particular outcomes we assess. Candidates in the self-reflection condition did not improve substantially on many of our metrics from the baseline simulation session (Time 1) to the final session (Time 3). Over time, without coaching, candidates' perceptions of minor, off-task behavior became increasingly negative, and they were correspondingly more willing to embrace exclusionary discipline practices. That is, our data suggest that reflection is not just neutral; it can be associated with negative shifts in candidates' assessments of student behavior and their perceptions of how to respond to such behavior. We can only hypothesize about the mechanisms underlying these shifts, though we theorize that frustration with being unable to redirect effectively might be associated with these negative shifts in perceptions.

EXTRACT ONE

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Cohen et al. found that just asking trainee teachers to reflect did not improve their classroom performance in terms of managing behaviour, why might this be?

2. Where trainee teachers are unable to improve their ability to manage students' behaviour, why might this lead them to 'embrace exclusionary practices'?

3. What does this tell us about coaching in terms of its ability to improve the school experience of marginalised students?

KICK-START YOUR NQTS' CAREERS WITH

EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

This brand new, DfE-funded programme builds on the thinking behind the Early Career Framework to help educators early in their careers to develop expertise and improve wellbeing and job satisfaction.

For: NQTs and their mentors.

Length: Two years.

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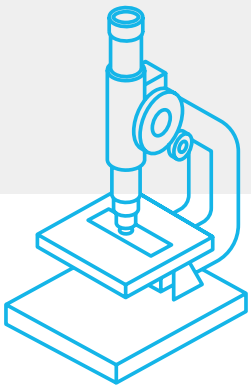

CASE STUDY:
INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING ON OUR EARLY CAREER TEACHERS PROGRAMME

Kathryn Darwin is a Lead Teacher at Delta Manor Croft Academy in Dewsbury and a self-proclaimed "teaching and learning geek". Here Kathryn reflects on what it was like mentoring an early career teacher as part of Ambition Institute's early roll-out of the Early Career Framework in 2020.

As a mentor on the programme, Kathryn helped develop her junior colleague's teaching practice with a carefully sequenced curriculum with a strong focus on instructional coaching.

This put Kathryn into the role of expert, using granular, evidence-based insights to help her mentee identify points for improvement. Together, they tackled these improvement points one at a time, so that Kathryn's mentee was not overwhelmed with too much information or demoralised by the scope of the task. Kathryn reflects that this was very different from her own experiences when she began her career:

"When I was new to teaching, no one ever really showed me what 'good' looked like, except for saying 'go and observe'," she reflects. "Showing what 'good' looks like is much more than just talking about it. It's what we do with the kids; why would we not do it with a novice teacher?"

"I'm so pleased that Ambition's programme is built around instructional coaching," says Kathryn. "When working with my mentee, I'm not looking at everything that's happening and coming up with a random target. I'm focusing on something really specific."

Kathryn found isolating a single element of teaching to focus on each week much easier because of Steplab, a platform that provides the latest research and sequences them in bite-sized chunks that build on what has gone before.

Working with evidence at this early career stage has had a profound impact on Kathryn's mentee:

"My new teacher is engaging with research at a much earlier stage in their career than I did. And I have found new insights into my own teaching practice!"

Seeing evidence put into action has opened up teaching and learning conversations across school as well: "It is not just impacting the mentors and early career teachers, but actually impacting school culture," Kathryn says.

EXTRACT TWO

HABIT FORMATION LIMITS GROWTH IN TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS:

A REVIEW OF CONVERGING EVIDENCE FROM NEUROSCIENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Author: Sims, S, Hobbiss, M, & Allen, B.
Source: Review of Education

Whilst re-emphasising that habitual control of behaviour in classrooms is not necessarily a bad thing, in this extract Sims, Hobbiss and Allen argue that rigidity of formed habits can inhibit teacher development. They suggest instructional coaching provides an alternative; not only removing detrimental habits, but replacing them or overwriting them with new habits.

It is important to re-emphasise at this point that habitual control of behaviour in classrooms is not necessarily a bad thing. Developing automatic routines is an essential step for novice teachers if they are to begin to overcome the high levels of cognitive load that can be imposed by working in the classroom (Feldon, 2007). However, whilst a degree of automaticity can be beneficial to a teacher, it is clear that rigidity in behaviour can be maladaptive. As discussed above, the immediate and automatic triggering of habits by associated contexts means that habitual behaviours may override more deliberative intentions. When such intentions conflict with the established habit, behaviour is likely to proceed in line with the habit, rather than the intention (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). The stronger the habit, the less intention influences performance (Verplanken et al., 1998). This may lead to an inability to adapt practice in the light of new evidence on effective practice, new curricula or different types of students—thus locking in certain suboptimal ways of working.

Clearly, these findings have implications for teacher development. In particular, they suggest that professional development programmes that target increased teacher knowledge of certain pedagogical techniques are unlikely to be sufficient for improved practice. Unless environmental changes which serve to weaken the contextual cues for pre-existing habitual behaviour are also enacted in parallel, increasing teachers' knowledge is unlikely to disrupt established cue-response associations (Webb & Sheeran, 2006; Gardner, 2012). Unfortunately, this approach seems to be common in education—data from international teacher surveys shows that for

two thirds of teachers (66.6%) most professional development only involves listening to an instructor provide information (OECD, 2013: Table 4.19). Similarly, alerting teachers to the difficulty of changing practice is unlikely to help, since habitual responses are likely to be triggered and possibly even executed before a teacher has become consciously aware of this fact. Because habits are regulated by a circuit in the brain characterised by fast, automatic responses, they will likely always be one step ahead of conscious processes regulated by the slow, deliberative circuit.

Given the difficulties involved in trying to overcome habit by conscious means, it is likely more promising to focus instead on replacing one habitual response with another. This involves re-associating the same cues with new responses, thus shortcircuiting pre-existing cue-response links. Replacing habits can be achieved in the same way that the original habits were established: through repetition of the desired behaviour in the presence of the relevant environmental cues (Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). With respect to teaching, this would require the repeated use of a new technique or approach in a realistic (or near-realistic) classroom environment. One type of professional development which incorporates these features is instructional coaching, which involves experts working with teachers to develop specific skills in a sustained observation-feedback-practice cycle (Knight, 2007; Kraft et al., 2016; Kraft & Blazar, 2017). Coaching often involves rehearsing new techniques in a controlled environment, then implementing them in a real lesson (often captured on video), then receiving feedback from an observer and then re-implementing the technique in a subsequent lesson. Interestingly, instructional coaching has been shown in replicated randomised controlled trials (Allen et al., 2011, 2015) and in meta-analysis of causal studies (Kraft et al., 2016) to bring about changes in teaching practice and improvements in pupil test scores. Of course, there are many other types of professional development which could incorporate repeated practice in the classroom environment, but we interpret the literature on instructional coaching as further converging evidence that habits limit teacher effectiveness, unless they are replaced or overwritten with new habits. Our review suggests that teacher professional development should look to incorporate repeated practice in natural environments in order to embed new teaching practices.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What role do existing habits play in inhibiting teacher professional learning?

2. Why does this make professional learning solely focused on knowledge change insufficient?

3. How can instructional coaching help to overcome this challenge?

OUR NPQ SUITE

Find out how our programmes can support teachers and leaders to keep getting better.

SPECIALIST NPQs

The new specialist National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) have been created to help teachers develop different aspects of their practice in teaching and leadership. They replace the NPQ for Middle Leadership and provide teachers and middle leaders with a formal framework through which they can hone and develop expertise in their craft.

The new specialist NPQs:

> NPQ for Leading Teaching
> NPQ for Leading Teacher Development
> NPQ for Leading Behaviour and Culture

Length: 12 months each.

LEARN MORE

LEADERSHIP NPQs

The reformed leadership National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) have the same names as their previous iterations but are very different in substance. They pay less attention to generic management and leadership styles and more attention to the knowledge and skills that school leaders need to tackle the persistent problems of their daily roles.

The reformed leadership NPQs:

> NPQ for Senior Leadership
> NPQ for Headship
> NPQ for Executive Leadership

Length: 18 months each.

LEARN MORE

EXTRACT THREE

PARSING THE PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Author: Kennedy, M.
Source: Journal of Teacher Education

In this extract, Mary Kennedy argues that to help novice teachers, we need to focus less on the actions we see, and instead develop a more sophisticated understanding of what teachers do. Kennedy proposes five persistent problems and suggests they can be used as a framework for understanding observed behaviours, examining their purposes and evaluating their value, and driving improvements to the expertise and mental models of teachers.

When we define teaching by the visible practices we see, without attending to the role these practices have in the overall lesson, novices are likely to use their newly acquired practices at the wrong times, in the wrong places, or for the wrong reason. Clarity about purposes is especially important for novices because novices themselves hold many misconceptions about what teachers do and why. Their theories of action are often based on naive childhood perceptions of their own teachers, and our role as teacher educators is to help them develop a more sophisticated understanding of what teachers do…

We have misplaced our focus on the actions we see; when what is needed is a focus on the purposes those actions serve. In the next section I propose such an approach.

Learning to think about teaching practices in terms of their purposes in the overall process of teaching is especially important for novices because novices themselves hold naïve theories of action about what teachers do and why. For instance, their theories of action can be based on childhood perceptions of their own teachers, and our role as teacher educators is to help them develop a more sophisticated understanding of what teachers do.

But notice that shifting our language from terms of action to terms of purpose does not, by itself, ensure that we will find a coherent and useful language for parsing teaching. We can easily go awry and generate hundreds of things teachers strive to achieve, ranging from extremely broad goals such as "help students learn the curriculum" to extremely narrow and fleeting goals like "Get Frederick to stop poking Julio." We still need a way to parse practice into a handful of important, meaningful, and analytically distinct purposes that teachers' actions serve.

My proposal parses teaching behaviors according to five persistent challenges faced by virtually all teachers. I argue that most observed teaching behaviors can be understood if they are characterized as addressing one of these challenges, rather than characterized by the actions we observe. We need to help novices understand that the behaviors they see are simply one possible solution to a broad teaching challenge, and that other solutions are also possible. By focusing on challenges, rather than on solutions, we help novices learn to think strategically about how their actions address a larger purpose, rather than focusing on how to mimic a set of actions that they observe.

I argue that these five challenges are universal in teaching, and are intrinsic to the process of teaching, so that every teacher must address them. They cannot be avoided. Thus, they offer a useful framework for parsing observed behaviors, examining their purposes and evaluating their value.

Kennedy's 5 'persistent problems' are:

1: Portraying the curriculum (planning and explaining)
2: Enlisting student participation in lessons
3: Exposing student thinking (assessing and responding)
4: Containing student behaviour
5: Accommodating personal needs (of the teacher)

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. If coaching needs to support teachers to change their habits then coaches need to have clarity over what good teaching looks like. What does Kennedy argue are the problems with focusing solely on the actions that teachers perform?

2. How does she propose we should organise our knowledge of teaching?

3. What are the benefits of encouraging teachers to 'think strategically' about their classroom actions?

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Get in touch today to find out how you can nominate your staff, or yourself, for one of our programmes.

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