Educative mentoring versus instructional coaching: what approach enables mentors to support student-teacher learning?

Dr Elizabeth White and Julia Mackintosh

University of Hertfordshire

Abstract

This article considers professional development for student-teachers through instructional coaching and educative mentoring, examining how the two approaches are framed, and their commonalities and differences. The concluding discussion sets out the important contributions of each approach, challenging the false perception of dualism between them that may be arising, and emphasising the need for an underpinning educative approach to mentoring.

Introduction

Ongoing professional development in teaching contributes to improving the quality of teaching, so that all pupils may reach their full academic potential (Desimone, 2009). In England the Department for Education set out commitments in the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy (DfE, 2019c), which included transforming support for early career teachers by introducing the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019a), with an entitlement to two years of structured support and mentoring for early career teachers. This was followed by the introduction of the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019b) for initial teacher training, and reforms to the initial teacher training criteria requiring the re-accreditation of existing initial teacher education providers (DfE, 2021). The first three years of teacher development in school will be primarily enabled by the mentoring of student and early career teachers, and curricula are being devised for mentor development programmes. So, now, more than ever, there needs to be a focus on the quality of mentoring and the approaches underpinning this vital role in teacher development. Currently in the development of student and early career teachers there appear to be two different approaches that providers are promoting for mentors to use to support the professional learning of new teachers: educative mentoring and instructional coaching. In some cases, these two approaches are being positioned on opposing poles. This article compares these two approaches, to encourage critical reflection on current practices.

What is educative mentoring?

Feiman-Nemser in the USA (1998:66) first coined the term "educative mentoring" as 'mentoring that helps novices learn to teach and develop the skills and dispositions to continue learning in and from their practice'. There is a growing body of research evidence for educative mentoring as an effective professional development approach for early career teachers (Wexler, 2020b), from the USA (Pylman, 2016; Stanulis *et al.*, 2019; Wexler, 2020a; Mockler Giles, 2021), New Zealand (Langdon, 2015; Trevethan, 2017), and UK (Langdon *et al.*, 2019). This approach aims to employ a supportive relationship between the mentor and the student-teacher; aiming to help the student-teacher to value critical reflection and continued learning as an essential part of becoming an autonomous professional. It is framed as 'educative' where the mentor is a school-based teacher educator – rather than just a co-operating teacher providing a classroom for a student teacher for teaching practice, emotional support, advice and feedback. The term 'mentor' carries with it the idea of being a trusted advisor and critical friend. Having walked the same path, they are able to share their knowledge, skills and experience alongside their student-teacher. This also implies a broader relationship than just a coach providing direct guidance to reach specific goals.

Educative mentoring involves the joint work of the mentor and student-teacher focused on pupil learning. It can be understood as a form of situated inquiry embedded in practice; that is, the learning is in the doing of activities in the workplace. A common trope of educative mentoring is the idea of the mentor 'thinking aloud' for the student-teacher and in this way, helping to connect the 'Learn That' and the 'Learn How To' of the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Education (DfE, 2019b). When the reasoning behind pedagogical and curriculum decisions are shared the sophisticated cognitive map of teaching and learning events in the classroom as perceived by the mentor is revealed. The dialogue shifts from an apprenticeship model 'do it like this' to a critical examination of evidence derived from research and from practice, which helps to embrace wider educational issues and risk-taking in solving teaching problems (Jones, 2009). Explicit modelling also helps the student teacher to articulate their reasoning decisions and the understanding on which they are based, and to learn to think like a teacher (Polombo and Daly, 2022).

Educative mentoring is a broad approach that draws on multiple pedagogies of teacher education to effectively develop teachers as skilled professionals, including co-planning (Pylman, 2016), inside coaching (giving advice during lesson); stepping in (demonstrating during lesson) (Gardiner and Weisling, 2016); co-teaching; observing and giving feedback; critical conversation and reflection; and analysing pupil work. These are also the instruments for continuous development in teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 1998). Ideally, the mentor attends to the current learning of the student-teacher and the direction in which their learning is going. This is referred to as 'bi-focal' practice (Schwille, 2008). Educative mentoring also provides possibilities for mentors to develop professionally in their practice, whilst co-learning with the student-teacher (Schwille, 2008:164).

What is instructional coaching?

Instructional Coaching originated in the USA (Knight, 2007) and later was introduced in England (Knight and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). An instructional coach partners with a teacher to analyse current reality, set goals, identify and explain teaching strategies to hit the goals, and provide support until the goals are met. In this model it is thought that having a specific pedagogical target that can be accomplished in a short time frame will more likely ensure that development is attainable, building progress that creates a sense of achievement. Instructional coaching was designed for working with experienced teachers rather than student-teachers (Knight and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). There is research on the use of instructional coaching with teachers, but few studies are focused on the impact of instructional coaching on student-teacher development (Richardson *et al.*, 2020). Instructional coaching is framed as a coaching relationship, which can infer a transactional approach focussed on specific goals rather than a more person-centred approach to developing teacher identity. In the USA, the term 'instruction' is used to mean 'teaching and learning' whereas in the UK instruction is thought of as a command or direction and is more closely aligned with training for skill development than educating a professional. A misunderstanding of this terminology in the UK can, therefore, detract from the supportive dialogical relationship between the mentor and their student-teacher (Lofthouse, 2022). Interestingly, in the study by Richardson *et al.*, (2020) which reported positive perceptions by student teachers of instructional coaching, there was an emphasis on the use of instructional coaching within constructivist- rather than transmission-orientated mentoring approaches.

What distinguishes instructional coaching from other coaching and mentoring models is that instructional coaches teach others how to learn specific teaching practices by revisiting the same specific skills several times, with focused, bite-sized bits of feedback specifying not just 'what' but 'how' the student-teacher needs to improve during each cycle (Sims, 2019). Some instructional coaching models include prescriptive guidance outlining the set of specific skills and techniques that a student-teacher will be coached to master (Sims, 2019). There are software tools and other resources available to provide mentors with deconstructed practice, for example, Steplab (https://steplab.co/), used by Ambition Institute (https://www.ambition.org.uk/) and *Teaching Walkthrus: Five-step guides to instructional coaching* (Sherrington and Caviglioli, 2020, 2021). In each of these examples specific teaching practices are decomposed into smaller steps that can be explained, modelled, discussed and practiced in a context-appropriate manner.

Comparing educative mentoring and instructional coaching

In initial teacher education, both instructional coaching and educative mentoring are carried out through modelling, deliberate practice and planning, observation, and feedback cycles. They both provide student teachers with multiple opportunities to rehearse and refine practices defined in the 'Learn How To…' column of the Core Content Framework. In the context of initial teacher education, they are both likely to be characterised by individualised, one-to-one dialogical sessions; weekly interaction sustained over an extended period; contextualised support focused on the deliberate practice of specific skills. Mentors following either approach may be using guidance

from their provider or through a software package or other resources, applying their local knowledge to interpret the guidance appropriately for their individual student-teacher in their specific setting. Both involve weekly meetings where the mentor and student-teacher are literally sitting alongside each other with a focus on something that they are working together at, like a lesson plan, steps of a deconstructed aspect of practice, a video of a lesson, or looking at feedback from a lesson observation. Both approaches involve explicit modelling where the mentor is explaining their thinking, and not just demonstrating (the 'thinking aloud' of educative mentoring). In both approaches the learning is experiential, embedded in the practices of the profession. When instructional coaching is employed in the manner intended by Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) the mentor and student-teacher work as a partnership. Within educative mentoring the mentor and student-teacher share their work jointly (Stanulis *et al.*, 2019).

There are a number of ways of supporting professional learning through a one-to-one relationship including: directive – where the expert is diagnosing and providing guidance for implementation; dialogical - where there is a collaborative partnership between the coach/mentor and student teacher and facilitative - where the assumption is that the teacher already knows what to do. Both instructional coaching and educative mentoring are primarily dialogical and respect the professionalism of teachers but are also designed to ensure that they can learn the best practices. Instructional coaches are directive, providing discreet steps to move the student-teacher from where they are, to where the coach wants them to be. Knowledge and skills are learned in a granular way (Sims, 2019). Educative mentors, on the other hand, employ a range of skills to support their student-teacher, being directive if necessary, but as the student-teacher develops, their use of more directive approaches changes to co-learning about practice, with mentor and student-teacher jointly sharing the responsibility for pupil learning (Pylman, 2016). The intention is that the student-teacher will learn to think like a teacher and to develop the disposition of a teacher, developing their professional identity, values and beliefs (Feiman-Nemser, 1998). Thus, the practising of a prescribed sequence of discreet skills until perfected in instructional coaching contrasts to the idea of bifocal practice and developing holistically as a teacher in educative mentoring. A continued level of prescription may lead to the student-teacher relying on external support to develop their practice, as they have during instructional coaching, rather than learning the tools which will enable them to develop their own practice through an educative mentoring approach.

Why emphasise educative mentoring as an underpinning approach rather than instructional coaching?

The advantage of using educative mentoring as an underpinning approach rather than instructional coaching is that educative mentoring focuses more widely than just developing different teaching strategies. It is a holistic and emotionally intelligent approach to professional development. It helps develop critically reflective and independent professionals who view their classroom as a site for inquiry, rather than just following directive instructions to develop a set of strategies. Educative mentoring aims to identify challenges and develop alternative approaches through creating a culture of inquiry, developing teachers who are resilient and able to respond innovatively to a changing educational landscape.

A benefit of instructional coaching is the use of deconstructed steps to support achieving specific targets, to reduce the cognitive load on the student-teacher. So, instructional coaching may be one of the pedagogies that an educative mentor could choose to employ in an educative way, as described originally by Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012). However, care needs to be taken because data-driven approaches to instructional coaching like Steplab can lead to a mechanistic approach where the individual needs of the student-teacher and their context are overlooked in the interest of completing all the itemised steps and ticking all the boxes. Glover *et al.*, (2019) report on the use of a data-driven approach with teachers that are receiving instructional coaching, looking at the use of the online platform for understanding of how coaching acts can predict teacher and pupil outcomes. However, they do not examine how the platform and approach was received by the teachers who were coaching and those being coached. They emphasise that the platform was designed to be used in a 'non-evaluative, collaborative environment' (Glover *et al.*, 2019:100); which suggests a need for the coaching to be used within a relational approach like educative mentoring. A caution with instructional coaching is that it can become more directive where mentors are under time pressure, and where a software package encourages a more performative approach. This can lead to a superficial and reductionist focus on teacher performance and monitoring rather than on the development of a fully rounded professional. Instructional coaching is just one of a range of approaches an educative mentor can use to avoid limiting the professional growth of their student-teacher. There can be an implementation gap between the espoused theories of instructional coaching (non-directive, dialogical) (Knight and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012) and what happens in practice, which an emphasis on an educative mentoring approach may overcome, to provide a balanced and enriching approach.

A question arises as to whether there is a commitment to professionality in the novice-expert terminology embedded in the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Education (DfE, 2019b). How does the framework align with the conceptual framework of educative mentoring or the intention of instructional coaching? The Core Content Framework defines 'expert colleagues' as professional colleagues, including experienced and effective teachers, subject specialists, mentors, lecturers and tutors. In the educative mentoring approach these experienced professionals are valued because they are continually learning, recognising that there is a rich, complex, knowledge base which continues to grow throughout their career. To balance the emphasis on novice and expert, the educative approach cautions against seeing mentors as experts whose advice must be uncritically accepted and who set themselves up in a judgemental and hierarchical position of power (Polombo and Daly, 2022). Instead, expertise is continually developing as they are learning. With instructional coaching Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012:103) emphasise 'when leaders are positioned as experts and teachers are positioned as novices to be trained by those experts, the inherent inequality of the training relationship interferes with the likelihood that the practices will be implemented'. Being positioned as an expert can also limit the learning that mentors can gain from their engagement in the mentoring process. Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) establish instructional coaching within a partnership approach rather than in and expert-novice positioned relationship, and Goodrich (2021) states 'ideas about being "expert" or "novice" are not particularly helpful as guides for teacher educators.

Instead, we need to focus on the idea of supporting every teacher to make positive changes to their practice.'

Educative mentoring can be transformative because the culture of inquiry invites cognitive conflict and recognises that strength comes from diversity and multiple perspectives. In this way the context of standardised teacher development can be re-balanced and professional identity developed (Mockler Giles, 2021). It is important not to limit mentors to one strategy but to employ a range of pedagogies of teacher education in an educative way, of which instructional coaching is one, to develop the independent thinking needed by professionals. The use of instructional coaching in the form intended by Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) is a helpful practice within an educative approach, supporting mentors to deconstruct their practice, and to focus their feedback. However, caution is needed so that this particular practice does not become formulaic in the time-pressured environment of the workplace (Lofthouse, 2022).

Reference List

Desimone, L. M. (2009) 'Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures', *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), pp. 181–199. doi: 10.3102/0013189X08331140.

DfE (2019a) 'Early Career Framework'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-early-career-teachers.

DfE (2019b) 'ITT Core Content Framework'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-core-content-framework.

DfE (2019c) *Teacher recruitment and retention strategy*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-strategy.

DfE (2021) *Initial teacher training (ITT): accreditation*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/initial-teacher-training-itt-accreditation (Accessed: 14 July 2022).

Feiman-Nemser, S. (1998) 'Teachers as teacher educators', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 21(1), pp. 63–74. doi: 10.1080/0261976980210107.

Glover, T. A. *et al.* (2019) 'Use of an Online Platform to Facilitate and Investigate Data-Driven Instructional Coaching', *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, 44(2), pp. 95–103. doi: 10.1177/1534508418811593.

Goodrich, B. (2022) *Change Vs. Stasis: A Core Tension In Teacher Development.* Available at: https://steplab.co/resources/essays/BPryjjq9/Change-Vs-Stasis-A-Core-Tension-In-Teacher-Development (Accessed: 21 July 2022).

Knight, J. (2007) *Instructional coaching: A partnership approach to improving instruction.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Knight, J. and van Nieuwerburgh, C. (2012) 'Instructional coaching: A focus on

practice', *Coaching,* 5(2), pp. 100–112. doi: 10.1080/17521882.2012.707668.

Langdon, F. (2015) 'Educative mentoring: a way forward', *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 4(4), pp. 240–254. doi: 10.1108/IJMCE-03-2015-0006.

Langdon, F. *et al.* (2019) 'Challenges for principled induction and mentoring of new teachers: Lessons from New Zealand and Wales', *London Review of Education*, 17(2), pp. 249–265. doi: 10.18546/LRE.17.2.14.

Lofthouse, R. (2022) *Here be dragons - myth busting instructional coaching for teachers*. Available at: https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2022/01/here-be-dragons---myth-busting-instructional-coaching-for-teachers/.

Mockler Giles, W. (2021) 'Mentoring: Bringing it all together', *Academia Letters*, (August), pp. 1–4. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/61371782/Mentoring_Bringing_it_all_together.

Polombo, M. and Daly, C. (2022) 'Educative mentoring. A key to professional learning for geography teachers and mentors', in Healey, G. (ed.) *Mentoring Geography Teachers in the Secondary School: A Practical Guide*. Abingdon: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781003157120-17.

Pylman, S. (2016) 'Reflecting on Talk: A Mentor Teacher's Gradual Release in Co-Planning', *New Educator,* 12(1), pp. 48–66. doi: 10.1080/1547688X.2015.1113347.

Richardson, G. *et al.* (2020) 'Using Instructional Coaching to Support Student Teacher-Cooperating Teacher Relationships', *Action in Teacher Education*. 42(3), pp. 271–289. doi: 10.1080/01626620.2019.1649744.

Schwille, S. A. (2008) 'The professional practice of mentoring', *American Journal of Education*, 115(1), pp. 139–167.

Sherrington, T. and Caviglioli, O. (2020) *Teaching Walkthrus. Five-step guides to instructional coaching*. Woodbridge: John Catt.

Sherrington, T. and Caviglioli, O. (2021) *Teaching WalkThrus 2: Five-step guides to instructional coaching*. Woodbridge: John Catt.

Sims, S. (2019) *Four reasons instructional coaching is currently the best-evidenced form of CPD.* Available at: https://samsims.education/2019/02/19/247/.

Stanulis, R. N. *et al.* (2019) 'Mentoring as More Than "Cheerleading": Looking at Educative Mentoring Practices Through Mentors' Eyes', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(5), pp. 567–580. doi: 10.1177/0022487118773996.

Trevethan, H. (2017) 'Educative mentors? The role of classroom teachers in initial teacher education. A New Zealand study', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 43(2), pp. 219–231. doi: 10.1080/02607476.2017.1286784.

Wexler, L. J. (2020a) '"Empowering" Instead of "Crushing an Idea": One Student Teacher/Mentor Teacher Pair's Story of Learning and Growing', *New Educator*,

16(3), pp. 265–278. doi: 10.1080/1547688X.2020.1727594.

Wexler, L. J. (2020b) '"I would be a completely different teacher if I had been with a different mentor": Ways in which educative mentoring matters as novices learn to teach', *Professional Development in Education*, 46(2), pp. 211–228. doi: 10.1080/19415257.2019.1573375.