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Reimagining staff appraisal: trialling a collaborative approach to school-based professional learning

A Research Working Paper by Owen Carter, Babak Somekh, and Gary Handforth

Abstract

Traditional approaches to appraisal in schools often rely on 1:1 meetings, with staff objectives worked on in isolation from the wider school community. Here we discuss a model for collaborative professional learning, which encourages mutual rather than hierarchical accountability for professional development through the appraisal process.

A co-produced project between ImpactEd, Bright Futures Educational Trust and Leeds Beckett University, the research focused on trialling a collaborative coaching model for appraisal of support staff, involving over 100 Key Workers, Lunchtime Organisers and Teaching Assistants across 3 primary schools.

A qualitative analysis combined semi-structured interviews, observations and professional reflection, alongside quantitative analysis of validated questionnaires relating to sense of community and associated psychological traits.

Evaluation results indicate a positive impact on support staff's engagement with the

school community and dispositions to collaboration. This includes both statistically significant increases on a range of self-report measures and findings from thematic analysis of interviews and observations. These findings provide early support for trialling collaborative and coaching-based methods for appraisal and professional learning across additional schools and with a range of other staff roles.

Introduction

The project aimed to weave group coaching into the support staff appraisal process, using collaborative coaching methods to encourage joint practice development rather than individual 'performance management'. As a partnership between ImpactEd and Bright Futures Educational Trust (BFET), the project arose from a desire to consider if there could be a better way for developing and applying a more collaborative process and group

learning opportunity to performance management.

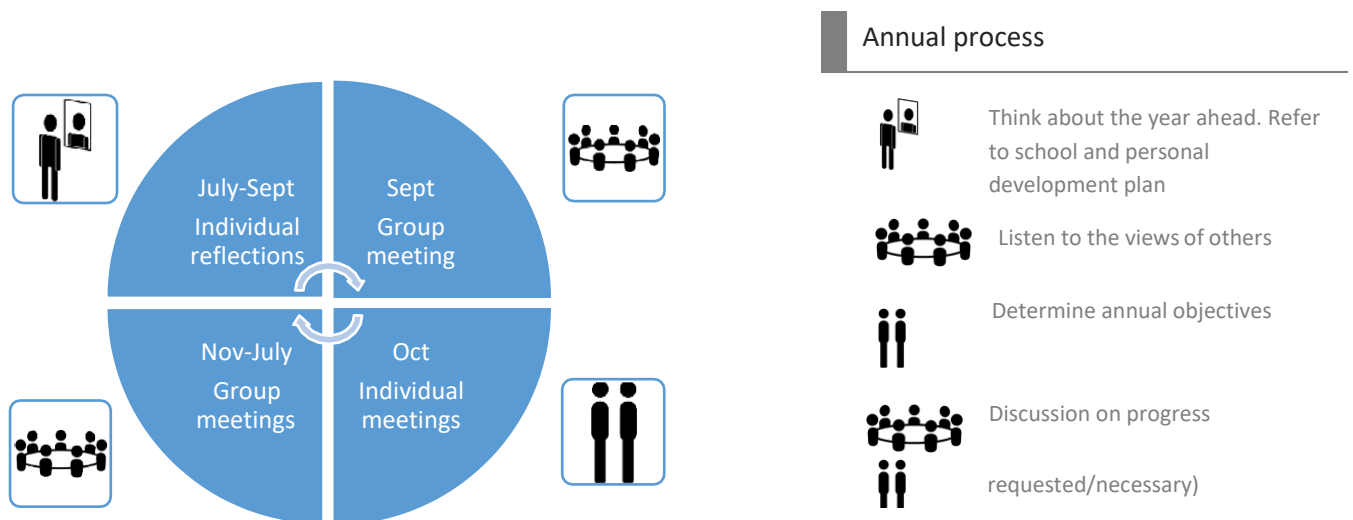
The proposed new approach to appraisal took an explicitly collaborative approach to formulating objectives, that would encourage staff to think about their role and responsibilities within the wider school community, and how their relationships with others within that community relate to common goals (c.f. Archer, 2015). (For further detail on the approach, refer to Handforth, 2018).

Running from late 2017 onwards, the project was conducted with several different groups of the support staff community, the main roles involved being Lunchtime Organisers, Teaching Assistants, Key Workers and Learning Mentors. For all of these, the basic process has been working through a combination of paired and small group

appraisal sessions over the course of the academic year, with some differentiation and personalisation based on roles and experience.

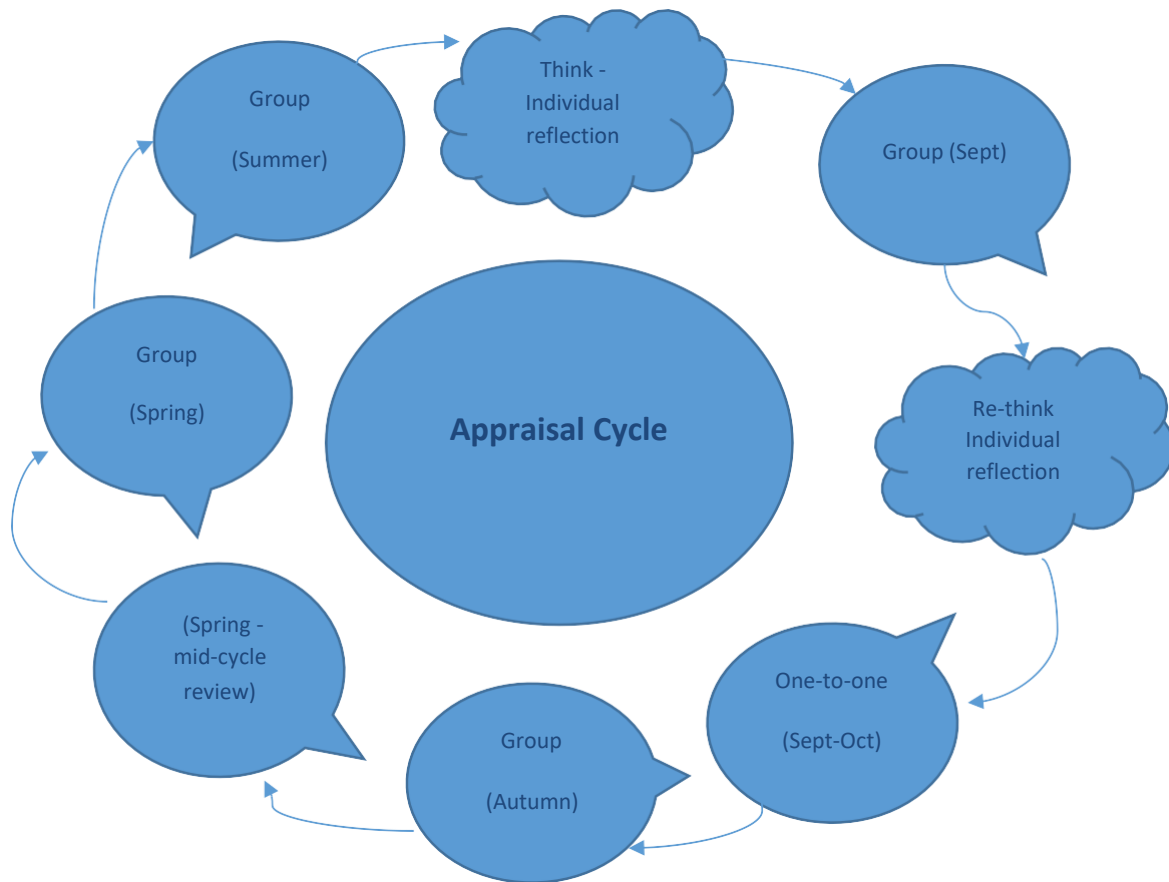
The series of group appraisal sessions began with reflection on the School Development Plan and where this might relate to individual objectives or focuses. Staff then had time to reflect on their own personal and professional development priorities and take part in facilitated discussions about how they may be able to support each other in pursuing these. From the early sessions, collective objectives for these groups were also agreed, typically structured with a focus on outcomes for pupils (whether behavioural, social or academic). Since then, these groups met several times to review progress and share lessons learned, outlined as a high-level sketch in the following figures:

Fig. 1. High-level structure of appraisal process



requested/necessary)

Fig. 2. Detailed meeting structure and approximate timelines



Background to the research project

The research element of the project operated as a collaboration between [ImpactEd](#), a not-for-profit organisation supporting schools in evaluating their impact, [BFET](#), a Multi-Academy Trust, with three primary schools participating in the project (Marton, Rushbrook and Stanley Grove primary academies) and [Leeds Beckett University](#) and the [CollectivED](#) network.

The project began by considering some of the dimensions of effective coaching, drawing on

guidance materials offered by NCTL and CfBT, CUREE’s framework for mentoring and coaching (CUREE, 2005) and systematic reviews on professional development in schools, including the work of Helen Timperley and the Teacher Development Trust’s Developing Great Teaching (Cordingley, 2005).

Driven by BFET’s commitment to reflective practice and practitioner inquiry, the approach was also influenced by the work of Donald Schon and Lave and Wenger on situating learning within everyday practices.

The initial review suggested a number of other reasons to specifically focus on collaborative coaching, including the possibility of fostering a shared sense of community among staff (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), which in turn may support networks, staff well-being and commitment towards common goals (Bruffee, 1993). Further parallels were found in the work of Andy Hargreaves on collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves, 2018).

This project was intended to provide proof of concept for this approach to staff development, beginning with support staff and, if successful, rolled out with senior and middle leaders and other teaching staff and providing a model that could be proactively shared with other schools.

Research questions

The core theme of the research project was how individual professional development relates to staff's collective sense of efficacy and engagement (and broader school development priorities). The key research question that organised the activity was:

'How does participation in a collaborative coaching form of appraisal affect support

staff's attitudes towards the school community and their role in it?'

Underneath this, a number of additional questions informed the project:

- How effective is the approach in bridging gaps between individual staff learning and school development priorities?
- Is this collective approach to appraisal perceived by participants and school leaders as more or less effective than traditional one-to-one conversations?
- To what extent is the approach developed throughout the project scalable and sustainable?

These were live issues for a number of reasons:

- In general across the school system, support staff are often comparatively neglected in terms of professional learning opportunities, and the term 'appraisal' often comes with negative connotations. This project offered an opportunity to change that narrative.
- If this approach were successful in the context of support staff, it may establish a model which could be deployed in other schools across the Trust, and with leaders and teaching staff.

- The project offered an opportunity to apply a robust approach to measuring the impact of collaborative in-school activities and so contribute to the broader evidence base.

Methods

The impact of the collaborative appraisal approach was measured through two main strands.

1. Quantitatively through pre/post design using validated questionnaires. Support staff responded anonymously to a range of validated assessment measures relating to the following constructs, before and after the appraisal period. Measures being used are the Big Five Inventory and Sense of Community Index (John, 1991; McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Construct	Rationale
Conscientiousness	Positively related to locus of control, sense of empowerment, workplace achievement. Links to reflective practice.
Openness	More engaged staff are likely to be more open to experience. Links to reflective practice.
Extraversion	Relates to sociability and communication in groups.
Agreeableness	Relates to levels of trust and tendencies towards cooperation.
Neuroticism	Lower levels may indicate happier staff. Lower levels of neuroticism are correlated with higher levels of empowerment/locus of control
Sense of community	Explicitly addresses staff engagement in a community and sense of shared purpose.

Data was generally normally distributed and so paired sample t-tests were used as the standard method to analyse changes between pre- and post- questionnaires. On some datasets Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were also used as a non-parametric measure and findings were consistent between the two measures. Given that no control groups were used for the project (all support staff in the schools were participating), findings do not necessarily show causal relations, but do indicate correlational relationships.

2. Qualitative research activities including observations, a range of semi-structured interviews and practitioner self-reflections, as well as informal feedback from managers and school leaders. The data from these activities was analysed thematically and used alongside questionnaire data to analyse the evolution of activities and staff perceptions over time. This data included reflections and feedback from all the key staff groups represented in the project – comprising leaders and managers as well as the support staff involved.

Findings

Quantitative outcomes

Across the 3 schools, we were able to gather matched pre- and post- questionnaire results for the following staff groups:

- Key Workers (N=17)
- Lunchtime Organisers (N=23)
- Teaching Assistants (N=18)
- Middle Leaders (N=11)

Taking the group as a whole, we observed statistically significant increases in:

- Sense of community (p=0.004)
- Openness (p=0.02)

And a statistically significant decrease in:

- Neuroticism (p=0.02)

In addition, non-significant increases were observed in:

- Extraversion (p=0.16)
- Conscientiousness (p=0.18)
- Agreeableness (p=0.06)

These results indicate, over the duration of the study, a greater sense of engagement with the school community, higher levels of openness to experience and collaboration, and greater levels of emotional stability.

Fig. 3. Mean, standard error and confidence intervals for all variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Err.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
socpre	3.116812	.062547	2.992001	3.241622
socpost	3.237536	.0621158	3.113586	3.361486
extrapre	3.627536	.0668237	3.494192	3.760881
extrapost	3.687246	.0673063	3.552939	3.821554
openpre	3.517391	.0629604	3.391756	3.643027
openpost	3.627536	.060047	3.507714	3.747358
conspre	4.325072	.0588098	4.207719	4.442426
conspost	4.36913	.0598658	4.24967	4.488591
agreepre	4.473188	.0537996	4.365833	4.580544
agreepost	4.546377	.0522062	4.442201	4.650553
neuropre	2.288551	.0866926	2.115558	2.461543
neuropost	2.174783	.0865224	2.00213	2.347435

Fig. 4. P values across role types

Role	Soc	Extra	open	Consc	Agree	Neuro (decrease)
Key worker	0.018	0.06	0.2	0.5	0.61	0.67
Lunchtime organiser	0.017	0.43	0.11	0.78	0.25	0.31
Teaching assistants	0.31	0.31	0.5	0.07	0.1	0.01
Leadership	0.39	0.08	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.01

Although breakdowns by roles should be treated with some caution given small sample sizes, the analysis does indicate that sense of community increases were significant among Key Workers and Lunchtime Organisers, but not Teaching Assistants or Leadership – however, these two groups did experience significant positive reductions in neuroticism.

All groups experienced positive changes in one or more traits, with the largest number being among leadership – perhaps a reflection of the benefits for them in playing a role as group coach, rather than appraiser, and related to positive changes among the ‘coachees’.

Qualitative outcomes

These observations have been broken down into three main categories:

- A changing view of appraisal
- A sense of professionalism
- Support and challenge

A changing view of appraisal

A theme that was clear from the beginning of the project was around a lack of common understanding of appraisal. Of thirteen support staff asked what they associated with the term ‘appraisal’, seven used the word ‘scary’. The majority of support staff had never experienced appraisal before, and it was largely associated with, in the words of one interviewee, ‘something that teachers have to do’.

In follow-up interviews with some of these participants, conducted approximately three months later, a more common sense of appraisal was beginning to emerge. Although

there was still some confusion about the word ‘appraisal’ and what it applied, the terms applied by staff to the activities they had been taking part in were now more likely to be associated with professional development, and the sense of caution had substantially diminished.

An early barrier to adopting a group coaching approach was the perception that every individual’s role was different and that there would therefore be little benefit to discussing common approaches. This was a theme that occurred multiple times across the first round of interviews and observations of the group coaching sessions.

Where this was overcome most successfully, reflections on individual pupils were used as a catalyst for discussion about the lessons that could be applied more generally. For instance, one lunchtime organiser spoke about how they had observed a pupil who often did not eat their lunch. When this occurred, the lunchtime organiser communicated this to their teacher so that they could plan ahead for any potential behavioural difficulties as a result. This story then encouraged other lunchtime organisers to share similar examples, and sparked reflections on how this could be done more consistently with other behaviours observed during lunchtime. (c.f. Mason, 2001)

A key question for the project moving forwards might be how, where such pieces of insight occur, how can they be consistently captured and shared with relevant staff across the schools. It is also worth observing that the appraisal sessions tended to take slightly different forms between schools and job roles within schools. One of the considerations will be the balance between allowing variability or adopting a standardised approach to session structure.

A sense of professionalism

In both the observed sessions and interviews, there were few barriers to taking part in the process – support staff were generally happy to engage in the activities of the sessions, even where this may have been unfamiliar territory. However, several interviewees noted that their prior experience of similar activities was often somewhat unstructured: staff were encouraged to ask for training, but this often may not be formal or have a clear follow-up. In subsequent interviews, staff noted that the regular group sessions had helped provide additional structure for identifying their professional development needs, and in some cases this had led to staff taking part in formally certified courses.

This emerging sense of professional agency is a key area that the project should aim to

develop moving forwards. The range of experience and time in post among support staff often led to substantial variance in how staff think about their professional identity. For instance, some newer lunchtime organisers would immediately answer questions about their professional development by talking solely about activities they had run, rather than their broader learning. Appraisal sessions moving forwards may want to consider opportunities for staff to articulate their strengths at the moment, and areas they are keen to develop further.

Support and challenge

Systematic reviews consistently find that the highest quality professional development approaches allow a level of open discussion and co-construction, but balanced with expert input and challenge (for instance, Cordingley, 2015).

Overall the framework offered by these sessions allowed for this balance. A key consideration is the ratio between coaches and coachees. The most successful sessions had facilitators who were able to guide discussions in small groups; where groups were very large and there was only one facilitator, this balance was harder to find.

In follow-up interviews, most participants were able to provide evidence of tangible

actions they had taken as a result of the sessions. Almost all could offer instances of something they had considered more deeply or examined their thinking on. A number of participants observed that it was actually after the group sessions that they had done their hardest thinking – building in these reminders and follow-ups for individuals generated from the group activities is therefore likely to be key for the success of the model moving forwards.

Implications

These results are highly encouraging, suggesting a positive impact across a range of inter-related areas. Immediate next steps now will be to consider how the model might work – and may differ – with other staff roles, and what a second year of the process will look like, building on lessons from the first.

Although there are a number of transferable elements to this appraisal model, there are some challenges to adopting it, ranging from the logistical to the theoretical:

- Some members of staff may be reluctant to share their areas for development in a group setting, or consider appraisal as something that has to be solely individual. Indeed, when asked about the prospect of piloting the approach with teaching

staff, several teachers expressed this concern.

- Creating the time and space for large numbers of staff members to come together can be a timetabling challenge. Where some support staff members may be paid on an hourly basis, there are also cost implications to creating extra time for development associated activities.
- Senior leaders will need to be champions of the approach, so that is closely allied to school development plans and seen as a core part of the activity of the school.

Where well embedded and staff are committed to the approach, however, the potential benefit is substantial: robust group accountability that builds rather than diminishes practitioner agency and influence, and may support higher-quality decision making. Indeed, our quantitative results suggest that the approach may also contribute towards small but significant increases in staff engagement with the school community, a more open and collaborative attitude, and greater emotional stability. That in turn may allow for a fuller understanding of the multiple factors which can support and affect pupil learning.

Ultimately, then, as well as contributing towards a more robust and joined-up means

of handling appraisal, the real potential of the model will be in how it contributes towards stronger, professional learning focused school

culture. Our work so far suggests it may well do so.

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