

The following structure was developed from Elliott's work in Action Research For Educational Change, and the work of Cohen and Manion in Research Methods In Education:

- 1 Available data suggested room for improvement.
- 2 The department defined the problem.
- 3 The department arranged classroom observations to assess need and suggest ideas for development.
- 4 The department received feedback and agreed on an action plan for improvement.
- 5 A plan was implemented over a period and was regularly evaluated.

In the time available, implementation and evaluation of the action plan could not be fully researched. To be sustainable, the action plan has to be run by the department.

This approach allowed participation, contribution and, to some extent, ownership of the research – rather than it being imposed from outside. This is a key issue, as the research was limited in its effectiveness by a failure to establish clear criteria with the senior management. Having authority to implement and manage change in an institution is not the same as trying to introduce change in an institution in which one has no authority.

### Further Reading

*Improving Teacher Effectiveness At Rusbden School*, a practical pack for mentors.

Elliott, J., *Action Research For Education Change*, Open University Press.

Cohen and Manion, *Research Methods In Education*, Routledge.

## Improving teaching and learning with mentorship

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### AIM

*To increase the record of achievement among Year 7 and Year 12 pupils in a girls' comprehensive school through regular mentoring interviews between pupils and teachers.*

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ It is important to create a secure environment in which existing practices can be challenged as a natural and systematic part of professional development and school organisation.
- ★ The focus has to be on teaching and learning rather than on discipline as a means of tackling behavioural problems.
- ★ All pupils need a balance of positive feedback and constructive criticism.
- ★ Learners' needs have to be identified.
- ★ Priority should be given to the classroom experience of teaching and learning systematically across the school by establishing it as a regular agenda item at meetings.
- ★ It is important to recognise the prescriptive impact of recent national trends on some teachers and to identify strategies for reintroducing reflection to teachers' practice where it has been lost.

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## Explanation

Mentorship uses observation and feedback to encourage reflection and to trigger improvements and changes in practice.

My research involved introducing the mentoring model into a modern foreign languages department in a school in a neighbouring town.

The existing data on the school comprised:

- ★ *an Ofsted report;*
- ★ *an LEA report on Year 8 experience;*
- ★ *GCSE results:*

### 1996 modern languages:

Percentages of pupils achieving grade C or above:

Males	23 per cent
Females	38 per cent

This data led the department to agree that it must concentrate on how its teachers reflected gender issues in their teaching and how they developed positive relationships with their students in the classroom. They adopted a model of mentoring as part of their strategy for tackling these issues.

*“The main role of the head of department is their responsibility for the classroom”*

The statements below are extracts from discussions with teachers in the department.

“It isn’t a problem.”  
“I’ve always made a fuss of boys.”  
“Behaviour is the issue.”

A structured method of observation to reflect on the validity of these and other statements was not in place in the modern languages classrooms, or across the whole school. In the school where mentoring had been successful, a structured approach to observation as a means of improving teaching was well established and featured in the school’s management plan and GEST activities.

The school in which the model had been successful was well resourced, as evidenced by a 93 per cent satisfactory or better Ofsted view of teaching and learning. £28,000 had been earmarked to allow one period of observation for 10 staff during 1995/96 and for 20 staff in 1996/97.

The level of support, together with INSET on what made a good lesson and how the head of department could facilitate this, created an atmosphere that supported the school’s culture of encouraging self-reflection and feedback.

As a basis for development, the neighbouring school’s modern foreign languages department agreed to participate in 15 lessons of mutual classroom observation. There were agreed guidelines in terms of structure, issues and feedback.

During the process in which it was agreed to carry out the project, it emerged that there was no system of examining teaching and learning styles, and that – perhaps of equal interest – no relationship was seen between teaching and learning strategies and behaviour in the classroom.

## Issues arising

The observations demonstrated the following common threads of concern:

- ★ *girls were frequently given responsibility within the class;*
- ★ *in several lessons, despite the agreed awareness of the GCSE statistics, there were four times as many negative comments to boys as there were to girls;*
- ★ *there was little evidence of differentiation and work at the level of the whole class was commonplace.*

In the observations remarking on the success of the lesson, the following were common factors:

- ★ *variety of tasks;*
- ★ *paired work;*
- ★ *many positive comments to both sexes.*

These are not startling in themselves but are examples of how classroom teachers may have overlooked reflection on practice in light of all the pressures they have had to face in recent years.

*“During the process in which it was agreed to carry out the project, it emerged that there was no system of examining teaching and learning styles.”*

## Some outcomes from mentoring and observation

There was a qualitative change of language subsequent to the observation process. When asked to comment on the experience, teachers said:

“I saw effective methodologies that I don’t use.”  
“I saw impressive use of target language.”  
“I don’t deal with low-level disruption early enough.”

A researcher may have expected a great deal more, including reflection on the classroom dynamic and interaction, but perhaps this is being over-ambitious. It may be that we should expect classroom teachers to focus on one or two areas of competence only when observation is first introduced.

In both schools it was apparent that the changes in recent years had temporarily led the professionals to a way of working based on implementation rather than reflection. There had been a move from a skills-based approach to a more mechanical approach led by the demands of assessment.

The time allowed to support the observations is a key factor, as the head of modern foreign languages has many tasks to perform already. Adding to them will not in itself lead to the successful implementation of mentoring as a way of improving teaching and learning.

Many of the positive statements from the classroom observations related to individual teachers. If this feedback is to prove useful, it is vital that structures are in place to enable them to be fed to the whole department for discussion and subsequent action.

The evidence from my own school is that, in addition to having the right culture and structure in place, mentorship has to be sustained over a long period for improvements to take place and be sustained.

Ratton’s control group benefits from six-weekly mentoring meetings at which the classroom experience is the first agenda item. This is reinforced by classroom observation and frequent visits to the classroom by the mentors and the senior management team, who “mentor the mentors”.

An example of this is in Year 11, where every Set 2 maths group is visited at least once a week to develop and sustain the agreed aim of encouraging pupils to feel confident in their ability. Parents have been involved in “achieving together” evenings to raise the issue of confidence in mathematical skills. As part of the programme, parents regularly receive letters about the progress of their children. The evidence suggests that this sustained approach is an essential difference between the two schools.

The various forms of support create esteem among colleagues and builds the department’s reputation.

The lack of support in the research school was apparent in the final comments of the head of department, who remarked that the department could not act in isolation. It may effect a change over a short time, but this is unlikely to be sustained – it has to form part of a larger framework to make a lasting impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

It must also be linked to a reaffirmation that the main role of the head of department is their responsibility for the classroom experience – to be a manager of teaching and learning.

## Essential notes about methods

The model used was Action Research, as it appeared to meet two main requirements of the objectives:

- ★ *it provided ways of investigating teaching and learning, and helped develop the focus of the research;*
- ★ *it brought issues into sharp focus by raising questions about teaching and learning strategy.*

*“As part of the programme, parents regularly receive letters about the progress of their children.”*