

Professional learning research insight: Building professional coaching relationships

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Professional learning is a common strategy for influencing and supporting the use of evidence-based practices in schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and enhancing learning outcomes for children and young people. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is exploring how best to deliver professional learning in the Australian education context. This research summary outlines early evidence from one of our research projects on coaching.

AERO has partnered with the Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab in the School of Education at La Trobe University to examine the mechanisms of sustained, in-school coaching (alongside online professional learning and targeted resource provision) that are the most effective for supporting changes in teacher practice and student outcomes. One aspect of coaching that can affect the delivery of key mechanisms is the relationship between coaches and school staff. Coaching works well when coaches spend time building rapport and developing relationships with teachers and school leaders (Kho & Ismail, 2021; Weddle et al., 2023).

Our study commenced in 2024, and after one year of coaching, over 50 teachers, support staff, school leaders and coaches spoke with us about their experiences of the coaching, including how they built productive coaching relationships. Here's what we've learned so far.

Early findings

Building a successful coaching relationship requires time

Focusing on building the professional coaching relationship in the beginning takes time but is a vital ingredient for successful coaching.

One school leader noted that:

It's really hard to build relationships because sometimes teachers are daunted with others coming into the classroom. So, it took our coach maybe a good six months just to build relationships, and then the teachers said, 'Okay, I guess you can come in.'

Adaptability, responsiveness and role clarity are among the characteristics and attributes that help build a successful coaching relationship

Building a coaching relationship involves:

- flexibility
- being a trusted source of expertise
- willingness to listen
- being knowledgeable
- understanding and patience
- consistency
- being prepared
- being responsive to needs
- coaching without hierarchy (Kho & Ismail, 2021; Kho et al., 2019; Russell, 2023; Weddle et al., 2023).

In line with this literature, our study participants identified that the following characteristics or attributes of coaches help build a successful coaching relationship:

- **flexibility with time and format** – acknowledging that circumstances change and coaching might look different than planned
- **adaptability to school context** – accepting that coaching might involve various activities with different people and/or teams of people, and that school factors such as scheduling and time release are important to consider
- **responsiveness** – taking varying levels of teacher and leader factors into account, such as their prior knowledge, their confidence and their current practices
- **credibility and knowledge** – presenting current evidence as it relates to content and context
- **being clear on role** – having agreement on and shared understanding of the responsibilities of school teams and the scope of the coach
- **having a clear and common goal** – agreeing on the focus for coaching and how this aligns with broader school priorities
- **being relatable, open and friendly** – being seen as approachable to promote engagement
- **approaching the relationship with respect** – acknowledging that respect promotes trust, which is important when collaborating on changes in practice.

The coaching relationship is continuously built during coaching activities

Teachers, support staff, leaders and coaches also talked about activities that helped to build their coaching relationship:

- Open discussions:

I have been having great conversations with leadership – gently challenging ideas and also letting them gently challenge my ideas. That's been very collaborative and purposeful.

— Coach

- Classroom observations, modelling and feedback:

I think when our coach comes into the classroom, watches me and gives immediate feedback while I am teaching, that is the best thing for me at the moment. When she is there, she will say, 'Can you try that for me? Watch me and then you do it.' That's really helpful.

—Teacher

- Collaborative support with curriculum planning and time for reflection:

I would say the most impact [at this time] is not in the classroom – it's been in planning, and navigating. Navigating resources, navigating the things that we've done in the past, and the ways that we've been set in. It was really good to have someone come in, and say, 'No, this can change, this is great, this is where we should be going.'

—Teacher

Building relationships within the school strengthens the coaching relationship

While coaching characteristics, attributes and activities help to build the relationship between the coach and those directly receiving the coaching, the school-wide effects of coaching may in turn be strengthened by building relationships more broadly within schools (Weddle et al., 2023). Coaches in our study spoke about the importance of working with school leadership teams to gauge an accurate understanding of school context to determine feasible delivery options. Teachers and support staff explained that the support of their school leadership team helped them to access and participate in coaching opportunities.

Building a coaching relationship is a joint responsibility between teachers, school leaders and coaches and is vital for schools to get the most out of their coaching experience.

About AERO's professional learning research

AERO is conducting a range of studies in Australian schools and ECEC services to gather evidence about:

- the mechanisms that make professional learning effective – for example, managing cognitive load, setting and agreeing on goals, action planning, modelling and arranging practical social support (see Sims et al., 2021, for further information on professional learning mechanisms)
- ways professional learning can be delivered at scale so that a greater number of teachers and educators can have opportunities to enhance their practice.

Our research project focused on coaching

Coaching is a promising strategy for supporting improvements in teacher practice and, importantly, student outcomes (Kraft et al., 2018). However, we still lack a clear understanding of which mechanisms of coaching are most effective, and how and why they work (Elek et al., 2024).

Our research project on coaching is a randomised controlled trial of 22 schools in Victoria, working with over 200 Foundation to Year 2 teachers, support staff and school leaders. Ten of the 22 schools participate in coaching delivered by a coach external to the school. (See [AERO Professional Learning Research](#) for a description of the project and [Serry et al., 2025](#), for the study methodology.)

Coaches in this study visit schools for 4 hours per fortnight and work with teachers, leaders and support staff. They use a framework based on the Student-Focused Coaching Model (Hasbrouck & Michel, 2022). In this model, coaching is defined as a ‘cooperative, ideally collaborative, professional relationship with colleagues mutually engaged in efforts that help maximise every teacher’s skills and knowledge to enhance student learning’ (Hasbrouck & Michel, 2022, p. xi).

Next steps

Using data collected from teachers, education support staff, leaders and coaches throughout the lifetime of the project (2024–2025), we will examine the impact of coaching, in addition to online professional learning, on teacher practice and student outcomes. We will also explore which mechanisms or elements of coaching are most effective at facilitating practice change and improved student outcomes. Finally, the sustainability and scalability of the coaching program will be investigated. Full findings of the project will be published in 2026.

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