

## **Improving teaching and learning in the Quality First Education trust**

We believe that “The quality of a [school] cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” (McKinsey, 2007).

The Quality First Education Trust (Q1E) is based on having a relentless drive to improve the quality of provision we offer our children. At the very core of what we are seeking to achieve is the desire to invest in the recruitment, retention and development of excellent teachers.

Our teachers benefit from the high level of support provided by the trust and the Q1E schools. They have come to expect excellent quality and high quantity of support. My headships and now executive headships have been based upon seeking to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the schools where I have worked. To achieve this we have invested significantly in employing staff to improve the teaching of others. This is something at the very core of our work at Quality first education, Belleville primary school, previously at West Hill and as an NLE and the head of a teaching school, national support school, and Beacon school and maths hub.

Following years of working to improve the quality of teaching and learning across multiple schools it has recently become clear that we do not have the clarity of language we need to discuss the approaches we use to improve teaching across the trust. With this in mind I have written this brief paper outlining the approaches we use with Q1E. It is intended that this paper will help us use a collective language to discuss our work and to raise awareness of the multitude of leaders adopt within our schools. Training is available from Q1E for each and every approach if and when you feel it would be useful to add to your “toolkit” of strategies to use with our colleagues.

We adopt a variety of approaches to improving teaching and learning. As individuals, as schools, and as a trust, it is important that we have a toolkit of approaches which we can use to improve teaching and learning. It is also important that all participants understand the various approaches.

Within Q1E, it is important that we use and understand the names and approaches to be used. As I say to staff: “the name doesn't matter as long as we all know what it means.” The definitions used within this paper define the approaches we use.

As the philosopher Kahlil Gibran says, “Say not we have the truth but say we have a truth.” This is our truth. We acknowledge that other methodologies and pedagogies exist, but these are our truths and they work for us.

We refer to our truth as a recipe. Described below are the ingredients for our recipe for observing and improving lessons. More detailed guidance can be shared on request. In some cases, policies or guidance have already been written, e.g. for professional learning

communities and guided lessons. The approach is given below in their usual order for observation and improvement.

1. Every class every day
2. Appreciative enquiry
3. Learning walk
4. Observed lesson
5. Modelled lesson
6. Coached lesson
7. Guided lesson
8. Team teaching
9. Wong
10. Research lesson
11. Professional learning community (PLC)
12. Professional learning team (PLT)

Having started this process, it is clear that there are many approaches and that such variety has a potential for huge variation within the approaches. These brief explanations and definitions do at least give us the advantage of empowering our staff team to discuss what they intend to do, with some commonality of language. A further stage will be to attempt to define when and how we use the processes. There is no desire to be prescriptive or limiting to our leaders and coaches, but rather we wish to provide them with a variety of tools and approaches which empower them to use the ingredients in the most effective way possible. Our priority is not consistency for the sake of consistency, but to improve the quality of provision we offer our children.

## **1. Every class every day**

Heads and senior staff are encouraged to visit every classroom every day. Children and staff are encouraged not to interact with the head as to not disturb learning. This approach keeps the head's profile high, with both children and staff. It also ensures the head has a feel for what is happening, timings, atmosphere, resources etc. The start of the day works well to ensure the head is aware how the day has started, but it is good to do this more than once a day and at different times to get a feel for consistency across the day.

## **2. Appreciative enquiry**

We use the term appreciative enquiry (asking questions - alongside) (AE) rather than appreciative inquiry (investigating – from above) (AI). The key purpose of raising appreciative enquiry is that we want all our actions to be positive and perceived as such. Our purpose is to improve the provision offered to the children and to assist teachers to improve their own practice in the best interest of the children. As a consequence, all that we do as part of our work to improve teaching and learning should be encouraged and welcomed.

The teachers, the coaches, and senior leaders have a responsibility to respect each other and our processes. We have to work hard to create and keep a positive working

environment where any or all of the approaches listed in this paper can be used and welcomed. It takes time and deliberate work to create such an environment.

### **3. Learning walk**

Learning walks are useful parts of a holistic approach to professional development. If used regularly, and as part of a deeper professional development programme, they can be effective in keeping up to date with what is happening in a school and whether or not systems and structures are working effectively. Learning walks are useful as a semi-formal way of monitoring elements of teaching and learning such as time-keeping, curriculum coverage, pupil behaviour, morale, etc.

The term *learning walk* to be most useful needs to be defined. For example, there could be huge variation in application, e.g. structured/unstructured; how data is collected; whether feedback is given, duration, and frequency.

### **4. Observed lesson**

The observed lesson is a traditional approach used in English schools. Here a teacher is observed by a senior colleague who makes notes and gives feedback. Many schools use their own school-based observation sheet that includes both areas of strength and areas for improvement.

This is an important part of the process for improving teaching and learning. One such element of importance is the 'focus time' given to the teacher. The importance of dialogue focused on the teacher should not be under-estimated. We have a variety of "observation forms" to support and guide the observer, both in their observation and in their feedback.

We are moving towards defining an "entitlement for observations." Rather than there being a push to minimise the number of observations, we believe observations should be an entitlement. Thus, teachers should know that they will be observed within specific timeframes. For example, teachers new to one of our schools will be observed within the first month of joining us, preferably within the first two weeks.

With our focus on monitoring and support, this observation ensures the new member of staff gets early and appropriate feedback and ensures that the head teacher is aware of strengths and weaknesses so that they can arrange for targeted support.

This is driven by the importance of the trust's philosophy that monitoring should not be underestimated. The key paradigm shift for many is to move from seeing monitoring as invasive to monitoring as support. Monitoring is a key part of our attempts to improve the provision to our children. It is not monitoring to catch out but monitoring to aid the learning of teachers

As an example, I am still proud of a line in an Ofsted report many years ago when I was the head of West Hill Primary School that quoted a teacher as talking about “monitoring and other types of support.”

Creating an environment where staff see monitoring as support is key to our philosophy. We encourage and embrace monitoring and other types of support. We are blessed to have so much support available to us as individuals, as schools and as a trust. The availability of support is not an accident; it is a Q1E priority. We wish to embrace, develop and improve what we do. In the same way that we want teachers to embrace professional development, so we want leaders to embrace professional development. We want to model “a relentless drive for improvement in all that we do” (Ofsted 2007). With this in mind we encourage challenge from a wide variety of colleagues and peers. Guided peer evaluations (GPEs) are an example of this.

The observation lesson plays an important part in ensuring senior leaders including head teachers have a clear view of what is happening within classes. There are three main approaches to observations:

- i. Judgemental
- ii. Holistic
- iii. Diagnostic
- iv. Peer

i. Judgemental observations:

Many schools use a judgemental approach where teachers are judged and/or graded. This approach is not integral to how we work as a trust but it would be unrealistic to suggest that we can operate without a degree of judgement. The key reason for a judgement is to help us prioritise need and the allocation of support. As a trust we seek to ensure the provision is never less than good for all children, in all classes, all of the time. Where practice drops below good, we must act to improve the provision received by the children. Core to this is improving the teaching and learning by improving the teacher's teaching. However, on occasions, the improved provision may have to come from other individuals. We are committed to ensuring the quality of the provision received by every child is at least good.

ii. Holistic observations:

Some observations are very much diagnostic while others are undertaken to get an overview or “feel” of what is happening in each class. It is important that senior leaders have observed teachers teaching so that they can make informed contributions to the dialogue about which teachers and which subjects or themes should be prioritised when allocating support. As in all areas of school life/leadership, there is a finite amount of support available to improve teaching within our schools and, as such, we want to ensure all involved in allocating this support have a good view of the relative needs within their institutions.

### iii. Diagnostic observations

Diagnostic observations are used in many situations: especially alongside other forms of teacher development. This approach involves the observer watching to see what goes well and what areas should be improved. As part of a programme of support, it is also used to see the impact of the intervention on the teacher and quality of teaching.

### iv. Peer observations

This is not widely used in Q1E schools. The gist of peer observations is that peers watch each other. Sometimes this is school led and sometimes individual led.

## **5. Modelled lesson**

The purpose of the modelled lesson is to show the observer what the lesson could/should look like (Gibran). Within the context of the schools there are elements of teaching that are expected to be followed.

There are four different contexts for modelled lessons.

- Class teacher modelling with their own class
- Leader modelling in the observer's class
- Leader modelling in their own class
- Leader modelling in another class

Additional information is available for each point.

A 'modelled lesson' is a lesson where the teacher knows they are to be observed and they model teaching and learning for the observer. When planning the lesson, the "model" needs to agree the logic of the modelling. The usual choices are between

- The normal lesson as planned
- Following the existing plans
- Modelling a focus point or teaching point for the teacher observer.
- Are we seeking to model good or excellent?

Additional information is available for each point.

Before arranging the session, those involved have to discuss the level at which the modelled lesson should be based. For example, for a new or struggling teacher, should it be within the teacher's zone of proximal development, or should the best possible standard be modelled? Should specific elements be modelled, or all elements of a lesson?

## **6. Coached lesson**

We use the term 'coached lesson' when a teacher teaches a lesson and is coached to improve this lesson. We provide training and guidance for our senior leaders on how to coach. We use the GROW coaching model for the initial training of staff. Adopting the Trust's philosophy of "united and unique", we teach staff in one model but as they become more experienced they are at liberty to adopt other coaching models.

As a team we discuss the difference between coaching and mentoring, and when it would be most appropriate to use each style. Within this paper I will refer to the process as coaching, but in practice one would have a dialogue about the approach to be used.

We have four main styles of coached lessons:

1. Traditional
2. Interactive
3. Guided
4. Videoed

All four styles involve the teacher teaching the lesson and the coach observing the lesson. The key difference is the timing of the coaching.

#### 1) Traditional coached lesson

This coaching traditionally takes place after the lesson as a form of dialogue about the lesson that has been observed.

#### 2) Interactive coached lesson

The coach observes the lesson and interacts with the teacher while the lesson is taking place. This may either be to speak with the teacher at an appropriate point when the children are working or to become involved in the lesson and speak with the teacher and the children at the same point.

#### 3) Guided coached lesson

The guided coached lesson uses ear pieces (as per the guided lesson, explained in the following section). They coach the teacher in real time through an ear piece while the lesson is happening.

#### 4) Video coached lesson

In this approach the lesson is videoed and watched together with the coach talking through coaching points and referring to the lesson and specific parts of the lesson. This is most successful where the coach has watched the lesson or the video of the lesson before the coaching session but this is more time consuming.

### **7. Guided lesson**

There are three examples of the guided lesson:

- 1) One to one
- 2) One to several
- 3) Videoed

Please also refer to 6 (3) above.

The logic behind all the forms of guided lessons is that an experienced and effective member of staff (the guide) works with a less experienced or effective member of staff (the observer). The observer may be an experienced teacher who has less experience of a

particular teaching style or approach. The guide and the observer watch a lesson together, taught by a separate teacher.

The guide draws the observer's eyes to key elements of the lesson. A point of discussion before the start of the guided lesson is *at what level does the guide wish to work?* For example, for a very inexperienced teacher, the guide may focus on rudimentary skills whereas for a senior member of staff, the focus may be on the subtleties of the lesson.

#### 1) One to one

In this case, the guide and the observer position themselves close together so that the guide can guide "face to face" within the lesson.

#### 2) One to several

In this approach the guide speaks to a group of observers simultaneously. To make this viable and effective in a classroom without distracting the children, the guide uses a microphone and the observers wear and use individual ear pieces. We have purchased sets of these earpieces to use across the schools.

#### 3) Videoed

Here a similar approach is adopted as per example 2 (see above) but as the lesson is videoed, there is no need for ear pieces.

Advantages include:

- what is seen can be controlled
- one can repeat and or focus on segments of the lesson
- There is no need for ear pieces.
- The activities can be repeated
- Once videoed the material can be used at a time appropriate to the group
- The teacher can see themselves teach

Disadvantages include:

- the need to video the lesson
- what is on the video is only what the camera-person films
- sound quality is hard to achieve
- as it is not live, to some it is not perceived as "real"
- the time taken to set it up.

### **8. Team teach**

We use the term 'team teach' when the teacher and coach plan and teach the lesson together. This may include a pre-ordained pattern where the teacher and coach have their own specific elements of the lesson or the open team teaching where the teachers and coach seek to move seamlessly between the role of the teacher and observer.

## 9. Wong

This approach is something we have learnt from colleagues in Singapore and it bears the name of the exponent we saw using it in a lesson we were observing while embedded in a school's maths department. Wong is also the name of a good friend who helped us develop our links with Singapore.

Interestingly, it is an approach that many people in England find hard to use; therefore, we have to agree permissions before using it within each school. The gist of the approach is that the senior member of staff (or coach) reacts immediately to any error or misconception and intervenes in the lesson, in order to correct the issue. For example, if a teacher were to explain a concept incorrectly, the senior leader would intervene in the lesson and teach both the teacher and the children the correct way to cover the objective. In its simplest form it would be to immediately correct a spelling or grammatical error in an English lesson, or to correct a batting technique in a cricket lesson.

## 10. Research lesson

The research lesson is a lesson developed and discussed by a group. This is usually a year group but may be a phase or a group of specialists. The year group model involves a group of teachers agreeing upon the "research lesson." They look at the plan together and develop a collective plan embracing the "power" of the room, i.e. using the combined knowledge of the group to plan the lesson. There are variations in how the lesson is then taught.

### The collective research lesson

This involves all members of the group

1. Agreeing the focus lesson
2. Planning the lesson together
3. Individually teaching it to their classes
4. Meeting together to discuss and improve the lesson

We use four styles of research lesson:

- 1) The modelled research lesson
- 2) Repetitive improvement research lesson
- 3) The sequential research lesson – multiple classes
- 4) Sequential research lesson – single class

### 1) The modelled research lesson

Stages 1, 2 and 4 are the same as for the collective research lesson but at stage 3 one person teaches the lesson while the rest of the group observe and then participate in the discussion at 4.



## 2) Repetitive improvement research lesson

Stages 1 and 2 are the same as above. At stage 3 the lesson is taught by one person with the others observing. At 4 the group meet to improve the lesson returning to a hybrid of stage 2. The lesson is taught by another member of the group to a different class. The process is then repeated.

## 3) The sequential research lesson – multiple classes

Stages 1, 2, 3 are the same as for the collective research lesson. At stage 4 the teachers meet to discuss how best to teach the following lesson in the sequence. The second lesson is planned and taught by all. The group then meet together to review the lesson and plan the next lesson in the sequence based upon the collective knowledge of teachers who have taught the lesson.

## 4) Sequential research lesson – single class

The process is similar to the sequential research lesson for multiple classes, but as the name suggests is based on a single class. Having agreed the lesson observation and planned the lesson, the lesson is taught to one class by one teacher. The rest of the group observe the lesson. The group then meet and discuss the lesson and how best to achieve their learning objectives for the same class in the next lesson.

## **11. Professional learning community (PLC)**

Below are our protocols for professional learning communities (PLCs). They are largely unchanged from those developed at Belleville in 2013. We use PLCs to encourage structured professional dialogue within our schools. The logic of the PLCs is explained in their name:

- Professional
- Learning
- Communities

They are a community of professionals meeting and working together to learn with and from their colleagues on a focused professional theme.

Stoll et al (2012), use the definition that:

“A professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning.”

Additional guidance and training materials are available.

### Q1E generic protocols for professional learning communities (PLCs)

All participants:

1. Review and agree the protocols.
2. Maintain focus and are present throughout the session.
3. Adopt appreciative enquiry.
4. Show a positive and respectful attitude to everyone involved, including themselves.

5. When sharing has an opportunity to provide any relevant information that they want the group to know prior to sharing.
6. Ensure their comments, feedback and contributions focus on the agreed theme of the PLC they are not personalised or negative.
7. Value all contributions and feedbacks.

The community:

1. Has control / ownership of what is shared.
2. Agrees a time frame for each stage of the session, monitored by the facilitator.
3. Everyone has the opportunity to, and is expected to, contribute.

## **12. Professional learning team (PLT)**

We use the term professional learning team in a similar way to the PLC outlined above. The difference is that we use the team to indicate a group that come together based upon a specific theme or subject. For example, a group that meets specifically to talk about English would be our English PLT. We encourage the same careful and open dialogue.

**John Grove**