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Principals accelerate professional learning through mentoring to enable educators' self-directed learning in diverse settings including rural public schools

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Abstract

This study investigated how mentoring could be used by principals in schools in South Africa to develop school leaders and teachers to promote self-directed learning within classrooms. Research accentuates that self-directed learning needs to be embedded as a pedagogical culture through mentoring to impact effectively on learner outcomes. Principals need to enable staff to apply this approach to learning more consistently through mentoring to ensure that learners move forward. Mentoring is identified as one of the most underused interventions to drive school improvement by the inspectorate in England. The researchers aimed to test this claim in South Africa, by developing principals' mentorship to professionally develop their teams and to enable learner achievement in diverse and rural settings. The study aimed to address the following research question: How do school leaders and principals use mentoring as an intervention to develop school leaders and teachers to promote self-directed learning within the classroom? The research project provides unique insight into how developing the skills of principals and leadership teams to draw on mentoring, can enable staff to refine their practices by facilitating self-directed learning in diverse schools and classrooms to drive social mobility. Using an interpretivist qualitative case study, the authors explored how mentoring, as an intervention, could be used to develop educators and impact positively on learner outcomes. The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with principals, school leaders, and teachers. The data suggest that mentoring made a significant impact on educators' self-directed learning practices.

Keywords: coaching; collaboration; leadership; mentoring; mentorship; pedagogy; principals; professional learning; self-directed learning

Introduction

This study outlines the important role that school principals and school leaders play in the success of moving self-directed learning forward in developing new pedagogical cultures in schools. This paper provides a unique insight into how principals and school leadership teams need to develop their mentoring practices to enable their teams. Mentoring in the South African and international contexts, such as England, is often underused as a cognitive leadership skill and intervention. This research project outlines how the use of mentoring can drive significant change. The study sets out to answer the following research question: How do school leaders and principals use mentoring as an intervention to develop school leaders and teachers to promote self-directed learning in the classroom?

The authors deliberately refer to school leaders, and not managers, in the context of the study. Kotter (2013) outlines that leaders lead teams by taking team members with them on the journey, and they enable their teams to have agency to lead with them, whereas management is a done-to process. School principals and senior leadership teams (SLTs) as mentors set out to work with their teams to drive school improvement and promote practices such as self-directed learning.

In a landmark study, Zuccollo, Cardim Dias, Jiménez and Braakmann (2023) highlight that the best school principals have the potential of adding two General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades to learners' outcomes. Hattie (2012) points out that leadership makes the second biggest difference in learners' outcomes. How leaders work with their teams to enable them to work with others is key to successful outcomes for learners. Thus, school principals need to continue developing their own skills to help facilitate their teams effectively as mentors. The inspectorate in England points out that mentoring is the most underused professional learning intervention in schools (Ofsted, 2020). Mentoring has the potential to make a profound impact on teacher development, and that is why school leaders need to draw on this intervention to model the behaviour that they want to see in their teams. When staff development is in place and support via mentoring is effective in a school culture with high challenge and high support (Myatt, 2016), teachers flourish and they impact positively on the learners they support.

School leaders often need to demonstrate the behaviour they want to see replicated by their front-line staff (Covey, 2013). Modelling how self-directed learning through mentoring works can help others understand what is required of them in their classrooms. Hattie (2012) points out that learning through dialogical engagement makes a difference to learners' personal learning as well as that of the adults working with them. The author also points out how self-directed learning may be used to enable learners to make specific choices regarding their next steps, goal setting, and to drive their own learning. Similar practices can be transferred to how adults learn, and

head teachers modelling the behaviour they want to see, may enable teachers and leaders to demonstrate this behaviour in the classroom too. However, to ensure that these practices are fully embedded in classrooms requires of the adults to experience similar learning opportunities regarding their own professional development. This will ensure that learning transfer takes place fully (Daffron & Caffarella, 2021; Sørensen, 2017). Understanding how to transfer learning into their own practice is key to ensure that a culture of self-directed learning is interwoven into the organisation's practice.

In learning environments, where a more hierarchical leadership structure is in place, the professional learning culture within the overall organisation (Buck, 2016). This might outline different expectations of how learning takes place for educators and learners, compared to what is advocated in terms of self-directed learning. It is, therefore, important to consider how leaders, and in particular school principals, support others through mentorship to empower them to embed self-directed learning approaches consistently throughout the organisation. Consequently, this will ensure that the culture of learning reflects how teachers need to move learning forward in the classroom. Cameron and Green (2020) point out that individual change leads to group, and later, successful organisational change. It is, therefore, important to reflect on how school principals need to draw on these cognitive leadership skills of mentoring and coaching to provide them with the skills to enable others. Blanchard, Fowler and Hawkins (2018) make the point that leaders need to know when to coach and mentor as well as lead situationally by drawing on a wide range of suitable skills to support their teams. Understanding when to mentor and when to coach is vital to help enhance professional learning for teams. Working with others and leading rather than doing it to others is an important next step to help drive effective change and to develop cultures of collaborative professional learning (Covey, 2013; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). This will enable teachers to engage effectively in the classroom too, to support learners in a similar way (Oberholzer & Boyle, 2023). For this research, mentoring was the key focus, however, for clarity, the authors provide a definition for both mentoring and coaching. It is important to point out that leaders need to understand both concepts well. It is important to understand that when professional learners progress, leaders need to draw on both skills/interventions to meet the learning needs of their teams. Dreyfus (2004) points out that at the start of a learning stage, novices new to a concept need to be supported through mentoring to enable them to navigate the new requirements successfully. When new concepts are introduced, mentoring is often the intervention to

use to ensure that the entire team can build a strong foundation to build on for future practice.

It is important to provide a clear definition of mentoring and coaching, as in many contexts, when these terms are not clearly defined, leaders' understanding becomes blurred of what it is and how it needs to be used as interventions. Oberholzer and Boyle (2023) define mentoring as a directive approach to professional learning, where the mentor provides guidance, support, feedback, models behaviour and co-plans with the mentee to enable them to learn from them. Coaching on the other hand, is a non-directive learning approach, whereby the coach facilitates the thinking of a coachee, enabling them to find solutions within themselves and to drive their own learning. In a professional learning relationship, it is key to know how to move on the continuum of coaching and mentoring, to ensure that the need of the professional learner is fully met to support them to move their learning forward (Buck, 2020).

With mentoring in mind, it is also key to define self-directed learning for the purpose of the article. Knowles (1975) and Mentz and Oosthuizen (2016) describe self-directed learning as a learning process through which learners drive their own learning by identifying their needs, set goals as well as targets, and drive their next steps in a non-directive way. Learners then aim to find appropriate resources to use to extend their learning, and they are able to actively make key choices to use the resources to aid their learning. They are also able to step back and reflect on their learning, self-assess, and evaluate where they are at, identify and assess how to move forward, and identify their next steps.

Self-directed learning is a process, similar to mentoring and coaching, where the learners' learning is facilitated (Oberholzer & Boyle, 2023). It is not a process that can simply be expected to take place without the necessary leadership, guidance and mentorship required to ensure that it is fully understood, and that those who need to implement it as front-line teachers, can confidently apply it within the classroom context. Principals and school leaders need to take the lead on mentoring their teams through the process to, as professional learners, become self-directed learners themselves to enable them to transfer their learning and skills effectively in the classroom to meet the needs of their learners to become self-directive.

Literature Review

Professional learning, similar to learning in the classroom, needs to move from directed to self-directed. This can only happen by changing professional learning cultures within schools. Vare, Dillon, Oberholzer and Butler (2021) point out that professional learning should provide teachers with agency, and needs to be personalised and bespoke. It

should motivate educators to drive their own mastery, autonomy, and purpose to support learners (Durrant, 2019; Pink, 2018). However, this behaviour regarding self-directed learning must be modelled by leaders through a leadership culture of mentoring within the organisation to ensure that teachers have agency to move practices forward in their classrooms. Adair (2014) points out that it is the leader's role in an organisation to meet the needs of the organisation, task and individual, and it is key for the leader to understand how to support the team in the best way possible to meet key organisational goals.

Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is a leadership approach which considers how to promote the teaching and learning practices within an organisation. Bush (2020) and Cameron and Green (2020) point out that instructional leadership approaches carefully consider what strategies are required to drive school improvement through teaching and learning. When learners and their learning are at the heart of each decision taken within an educational context, leadership champions work environments which are not overly fixated on performativity but advocates the learning of adults and the learners within the community. Leadership becomes adaptive and aims to make the most of the talents of all involved (Beauchamp, Hulme, Clarke, Hamilton & Harvey, 2021) by drawing on cognitive leadership skills such as mentoring and coaching to facilitate the thinking of their teams to progress to becoming self-directive, and model the behaviour they want to see in their own classrooms as well (Cameron & Green, 2020).

Oberholzer and Boyle (2023) assert that since teams are new to concepts during their professional learning journey, it is imperative to understand which cognitive leadership skills to draw on. At a novice stage, when learning new skills, even when a team is experienced in their practices (Dreyfus, 2004), it is advisable to draw on mentoring skills to work through what is required. This will enable the team to understand the skills, how to use these skills, and how to continue to develop the skills they require to implement new initiatives, for example, self-directed learning. It is important for principals and leadership teams to understand that their front-line staff do not know what they do not know and need guidance on key questions like, for example: What does best practice look like? Principals and leadership teams need to mentor their teams by using modelling to front-line staff to enable them to understand and see what best practice looks like. Principals and SLTs need to identify and show staff who can be observed within their contexts to understand practices with the team. Principals and SLTs need to help guide how these practices need to translate into the classroom, and how learners need to engage with these new skills too. They need to be

clear on what success will look like for teachers and learners in the classroom. Teams need key guidance through mentoring support to ensure that self-directed learning is fully embedded at all levels within their teaching and learning practice regarding their own learning as well as that of the learners in their classrooms.

Collaborative professionalism

Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) point out that working in collaboration with others enables teacher agency, and an opportunity to drive their own learning. Building a culture of collaborative professionalism, where team members can learn and mentor each other, and where risks can be taken in safe spaces to drive initiatives such as self-directed learning, is vital to ensure that teaching and learning is improved, and the principal's and SLT's role is to facilitate this (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). So often educators spend minimal amounts of time after their initial teacher education in sharing practice and working together on teaching and learning initiatives. Mentoring often only happens when new teachers are being trained, or when new teachers are inducted, or when there is a perceived issue with their teaching (Oberholzer & Boyle, 2023). However, Door (2017) argues that it is important for teachers to move their practices forward through engaging with their own learning to challenge their own practice and beliefs through reflective and reflexive practices. However, this behaviour needs to be modelled and championed by principals and SLTs to ensure that a collaborative professional culture is fostered where such practices can take place.

SLTs need to develop their team's own skills to be self-directed, to become autonomous, active learners who are enabled to become educators who model this behaviour with confidence in the classroom to their learners for effective learning to take place.

Moodley and Cloete (2024) accentuate the importance of how educators need to have a detailed understanding of how to construct self-directed learning and create a wide range of opportunities for learning to be co-constructed and where engagement can take place. The "why, what", and "how" needs to be fully outlined (Sinek, 2011). Working through mentoring with teams, principals and SLTs can provide the clarity and guidance through professional learning, to not only make visions and missions clearer, but to clarify the "what" and the "how" that is required in the classroom. This will ensure that self-directed learning is effective and co-construction of learning is key.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Kennedy (2005) points out that professional learning needs to progress beyond the transmission and transitional phase to the transformative phase, where

models such as action research and the transformative model need to be considered (see

Figure 1).

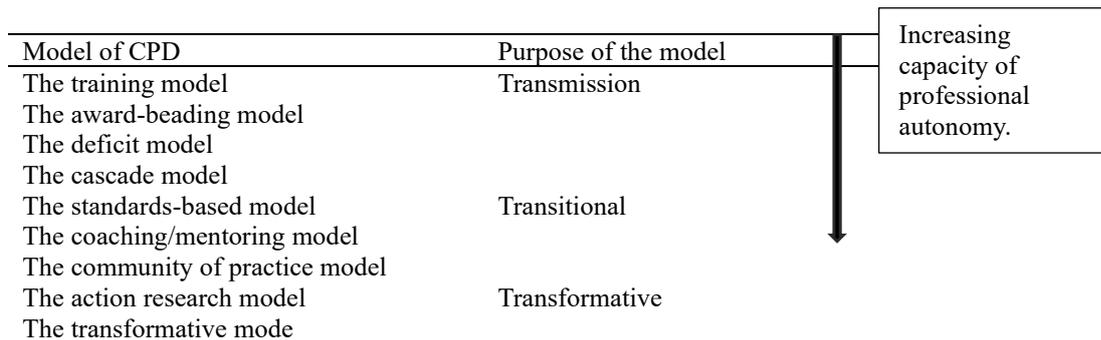


Figure 1 Transformative model (Kennedy, 2005)

Daffron and Caffarella (2021) and Sørensen (2017) emphasise the importance of learning transfer via the transformative phase of the professional learning journey. The key is to understand what the transformative phase entails. Through mentoring, where best practices are modelled, co-creating through collaborative professionalism can take place (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). Consequently, professional learners are developed as active learners to reflect in and on action (Schon, 1987), as well as become reflexive, where they can challenge their own beliefs regarding practices. This will enable them to understand them better, and to also find solutions to move practices forward (Door, 2017).

Through the framework outlined in Figure 1, we explored how principals and SLTs enabled their teams to develop moving from a transmission and transitional approach to adopt a transformative approach through mentoring. Teams can work through collaborative professionalism to develop their practices to embed self-directed learning more effectively in their classrooms (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). Drawing on a range of techniques and strategies, as well as sharing best practices, ensure a more bespoke approach that is suitable for the needs of learners within the context and for the specific learner demographic they serve.

Methodology

This qualitative interpretivist case study drew on semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of how principals used mentoring to support their teams to enable them to embed self-directed learning approaches such as identifying specific learning needs, selecting specific resources, reflective and reflexive practice, as well as self-evaluation and assessment to determine where you are at, and what your next steps need to be through effective goal setting, into their classrooms, and through mentoring continued to embed key practices, and sustain the practice to make key cultural changes within the pedagogical practices within their schools.

Yin (2018) argues that case studies are ideally placed to investigate a phenomenon in education, and this study explores how the use of mentoring as a cognitive leadership skill can enable self-directed learning within diverse and rural learning contexts as a phenomenon. As a qualitative study, the study aimed to understand how mentoring was used by principals and SLTs, and to explore their rich experiences and that of their staff on how mentoring had an enabling impact on their practices and outcomes for learners. Mack (2010) points out that interpretivist studies seek to make meaning from rich experiences and practices within the field it focuses on. This research project aimed to draw on this phenomenon to draw on the experiences of participants in a similar way to contribute to the learning and knowledge within the field.

The study was conducted by drawing on the perspectives of principals leading schools from diverse settings which included schools in economically deprived areas and rural areas in the North West province of South Africa. The participant sample was purposefully (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) selected. Principals, SLTs and teachers of two schools recruited were already engaged with professional development activities with the researchers, focusing on a year’s support to drive school improvement in these areas in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews reflecting on the learning experiences of the two school principals and their SLTs were conducted after mentor training, 4 weeks into the project and the final week of the first term of the project. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with three SLT members and four teachers at each school to gain a rounded understanding of how the mentoring support via the leadership team impacted on each team member’s work. Cohen et al. (2018) outline the importance of gaining a multi-layered perspective on the experiences of teams to help strengthen the data of the study.

The study adhered to the British Educational Research Association’s ([BERA], 2024) stringent

ethical guidelines, all participants gave consent, and participated in the study on a voluntary basis. All participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. In addition, all participants' details were anonymised in keeping with the BERA (2024) guidelines.

The case study was shaped by providing a clear outline and research brief to participants explaining that the researchers would provide detailed development opportunities for principals and SLTs to grow and develop mentoring and coaching skills to ensure that they were fully confident in how they needed to engage with their teams when working towards embedding the self-directed learning approaches within the classroom. The mentoring and coaching development took place over two 3-hour sessions. As in Kennedy's (2005) model, this phase can be defined as the transitional phase. Each mentor was also allocated an experienced coach to provide supervision and support during the process. This transitional and transformational phases (Kennedy, 2005) were to ensure that support was provided while mentoring their staff. Mentoring took place weekly, and mentors were assigned to all staff members. Mentor meetings were conducted in 60-minute sessions, and informal mentoring could take place at any point during the school week if mentors and mentees deemed it necessary. The decision was to focus on mentoring for this project because professional learners are at the first phase of implementation, and self-directed learning approaches were new to them and their practices. However, in future projects mentoring and coaching will be evaluated as work evolves and deepens; however, references are made to coaching, to highlight that leaders needed to be aware of the difference, and that, as the work evolved, their support would also need to evolve to meet the needs of their teams.

Staff at each school were provided with the relevant professional development training sessions on the school improvement focus (self-directed learning), as part of the transitional phase in Kennedy's (2005) model. Colleagues were asked to consider one or two strategies to use within their classrooms for the next term. It was explained that during the term, they would be receiving mentoring by the school leadership team and the school principal, to enable them to share ideas and practice in a safe space, and to enable them to progress further in their learning, which is part of the

transitional and transformational phases (Kennedy, 2005). Collaborative professionalism, as outlined by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), was explained to staff during these sessions. The staff were also informed how the mentoring support would be enhancing their professional learning, as well as how learning conversations would be encouraged (Knight, 2016).

Data were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model outlined below (see Figure 2). The aim was to draw key themes via a hybrid approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) applying an inductive and a deductive approach. This was to enable us to explore how participants' perspectives provided deeper insight into the impact that mentoring had in shaping collaborative professional learning spaces for staff to drive their own self-directed learning, provide agency, and move their learning forward to support the learners in the classroom. Transcripts from the semi-structured interviews were approved by participants for accuracy before they were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. The sets of data were carefully coded through the use of the model, and findings of the three sets of participants were triangulated to provide a trustworthy outcome (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014).

Data were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Phase 1 of the model encourages a familiarisation phase, followed by Phase 2 where key codes are identified. Phase 3 leads to coding the data, and analysing the data generated from the codes to identify the key themes. These themes are synthesised into a concept map (see Figure 2). The key themes from the concept map were used to analyse the data further, and to unpack the key findings as indicated in the section below.

Findings and Discussion

As explained in the methodology section, semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, SLTs and front-line staff to evaluate how mentoring enabled the development of the professional learning of staff. The data collected via semi-structured interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, and a concept map, outlining the key themes generated by the thematic analysis, was produced (see Figure 2).

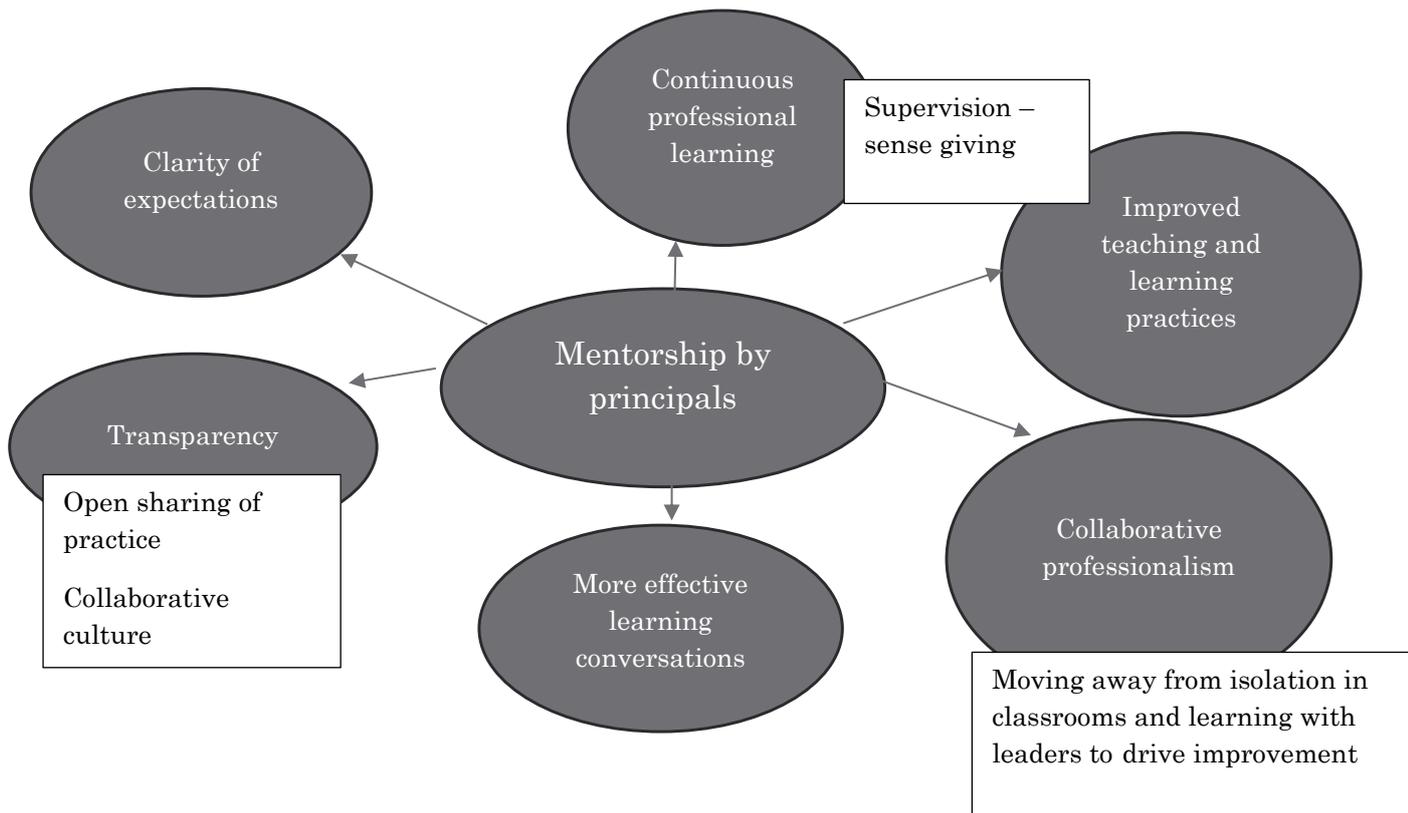


Figure 2 Concept map based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model

It is interesting to note that the themes underscore the importance of clarity of expectations and transparency. Participants, including principals, emphasised that the more they articulated the purpose of the work and how self-directed learning supported learners with key life skills, the more teams were able to make sense of what was expected (Sinek, 2011; Weick, 1995). By articulating the “why” more consistently, the “what” and the “how” became clearer as well. Myatt (2016) underlines the importance of providing high challenges and high support. Participants pointed out that by making the “why” clear through mentoring and working closely with leadership teams, they felt a clear sense of safety and belonging, where they worked towards common goals intending to improve outcomes for learners through self-directed learning (Buck, 2016). By engaging in collaborative professional learning relationships, colleagues were able to engage with their leaders without fear and understood why change was needed. They realised that they formed part of the process and had clarity on what they had to do to achieve that.

Emanating from the data analysis, the following key themes are discussed:

- Clarity of expectations
- Transparency
- More effective learning conversations
- Improved teaching and learning practices
- Collaborative professionalism
- Continuous learning

Theme 1: Clarity of Expectations

Creating a community where high expectations are championed through mentoring support via the school principal and SLTs is key to support the high expectations outlined by the principal's and SLT's vision (Myatt, 2016). Safe working spaces where all can flourish lead to nurturing learning environments. It was, therefore, important for teams to have clarity on the expectations (Buck, 2016). Sinek (2011) explains that when the “why” is clear, barriers are removed, and colleagues are able to focus on how these need to be executed and what needs to be done.

The two principals shared their initial thinking during the semi-structured interviews.

The principal of School 1 (hereafter PS1), who lead a small rural secondary school (hereafter School 1), stated the following:

I always felt that if I tell people what to do, they need to get on with it, and it will happen. However, through this process, I realise that leading change to drive school improvement means that it is a process, and that I need to lead through example to be clear on 'why' it is important to make the change, 'how' it will happen, and 'what' my team (SLT and teaching staff) needs to do. I need to provide them with a road map that will take them by the hand at every stage.
(PS1)

Principal 2 (hereafter PS2), a school leader in a primary school (hereafter School 2) in a deprived area in the province said the following:

I now realise that when you want to improve something in your school, you are a key part of the

process, others won't just get on with it. I was able to understand what my team needed me connecting with them more often, and also to show them what I meant in terms of the type of learning we want to see in our school. They realised that I am not only an administrator, but that I am also an experienced educator they can learn from, and it helped our relationships tremendously to share practice in this way. (PS2)

Both principals benefited from the process to learn how to connect with their teams and make expectations clear. They also realised that it was important to make the “why, how” and “what” clear, and work with their teams. It was not enough to inform teams that a change was needed, and they needed to drive this with them. Buck (2016) points out that clarity of vision is vital, but that the leader needs to provide the necessary support throughout (Myatt, 2016). From the principals’ reflections, they outlined how the process enabled them to do so. PS1 referred to taking “*them by the hand at every stage*”, which is a key element within the definition for mentoring, namely, to guide and give support (Connor & Pokora, 2017). Both principals realised that strong professional learning relationships were key.

It was also important that I had a clear understanding of what self-directed learning is to enable me to model my expectations, and what it needs to look like in the classroom. I also realised that members of my senior leadership team could be used to mentor others, and I was able to draw on their talents more as well. We (the school team including SLT and teaching staff) were all clear, that this approach will help learners to develop their skills and help progress learning. All our decisions were focused on what is best for our learners, and at the start of the project, it was clearly shared with colleagues too. (PS1)

Although clarity of purpose is key, however, the principals realised that mentorship also meant drawing on the strength of the team to enable others (Buck, 2016; Bush, 2020). Having a clear understanding of what was expected enabled the principals to model the behaviour desired from educators, but also to understand the challenges that they experienced to ensure that they were supported (Covey, 2013).

In the early days of the project, I had to remind educators and communicate our expectations consistently. Personal conversations with staff really helped to cement this. I also popped into classes to observe teachers’ lesson presentations and watched them in action. I celebrated their work in staff briefings. This all helped to build positive relationship with staff and disseminated clearly what was expected of them. For those who were slower on the uptake I had personal conversations with, visited their classrooms regularly, and I continued to help them shape their skills to embed the strategies regarding self-directed learning into their planning more effectively. It was about catching people doing the right thing, and it was about supporting each other to get there. (PS2)

The reflections shared demonstrate that the mentoring process unfolded over time, and that a relationship of trust was key to ensure that colleagues could engage with what was required (Covey, 2013). However, the clarity of messages, the need to communicate these consistently and to make expectations clear were key to ensure that educators moved forward successfully. Undoubtedly, understanding the needs of the team and working with each member of the team made all the difference (Adair, 2014).

Based on the experiences shared by leaders, they too needed to move from their initial learning to what they expected their teams to learn through their own professional learning journey. They needed to make a paradigm shift from transmission to transitional to transformational phases before they were able to mentor their teams (Kennedy, 2005). The leaders themselves had to move from novice to proficient stages of their mentoring to enable others to fully benefit from the mentorship programmes (Dreyfus, 2004). To ensure that self-directed learning practices were fully embedded, they had to know how their team members learned, how they worked in classrooms, and how to further support others with their teams. It was also crucial to know when they had to engage with individuals personally to ensure that the work moved forward. They had to invest in each individual teacher and leader’s growth to move from individual change to group and organisational change through mentoring (Cameron & Green, 2020). It is not enough to merely introduce a change. A clear theory of change and a clear approach to change is essential to fully embed what is required. Developing classroom teachers’ skills were imperative to ensure that it moved forward. Clarity of expectations for all is key, and the message needs to permeate throughout the process.

Theme 2: Transparency

Transparency of expectations was briefly discussed in the previous section. However, the data also reveal that principals, SLTs and teachers valued the clarity and transparency of the process. The clarity of the agenda in terms of why the focus on self-directed learning was key removed potential fears and barriers in terms of educators’ perceptions and enabled them to agree to implement self-directed learning practices in their classrooms.

Teacher 1 (T1), who was based in School 1, explained as follows:

It was really helpful to have a clear explanation and understanding of ‘why’ we needed to self-direct learning practices in our classrooms. By understanding the ‘why’ we all felt that it was not just another thing to add to our work. We understood that it would really help our children to learn even better. (T1)

Teacher 2, at School 2, said the following:

Now that I understand how it will help, I am more than happy to add it into my planning. I enjoy

talking to the head teacher about how I am starting to use [self-directed learning], and we are encouraged to share our ideas on the noticeboard in the staffroom as well for others to share. We feel valued and we feel that our ideas matter. (T2)

Teacher 3, at School 1, shared the following in her interview:

I was always worried about [lesson] observations, but with this project, now that we agreed to be visited by others, and we can watch others teach to get ideas, I am really enjoying the process. We talk more about our work, and how our teaching can help children. I feel that the transparency opened up a new world where we can share, and not be afraid. It feels like we are all in this together for the children. (T3)

Based on the comments shared in the above, it is clear that the clarity of expectations, through making the “why, how” and “what” clear, enabled educators to also understand why mentoring on self-directed learning should take place, and how the mentoring could help to build collaborative learning relationships which would eventually help all (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). Removing a culture of mistrust and replacing it with a trusting, collaborative environment enabled staff to share openly and feel valued when their ideas were used, and sense of unity and collegiality developed in being “in this together.”

It is evident that greater communication was needed for a shared purpose to enable professional learners with a clear focus and a clear understanding of how self-directed learning should be used. In turn, when staff as professional learners flourish, practices in the classroom should unfold positively too. It is imperative to know why it is important to ensure that a sustained approach to professional learning is taken to ensure that a shift can take place in the teaching and learning culture within the schools, especially when initiatives such as self-directed learning are initially implemented. If a sustained approach is not considered, the initiative, like so many others, will be used briefly, with minimal impact, and staff might revert to their previous practices. Dewey (1943, as cited in Door, 2017) points out that behaviour is manifestation of our beliefs, and we need to challenge our beliefs through continuous learning to ensure that our practices move forward through continuous reflective and reflexive practice in a sustained way. It is, therefore, important the school leaders model the behaviour they want to see through mentorship to ensure that teaching and learning practices embed best practice to support learners and their chances in life. Engaging in transparent professional learning practices through mentoring enable school leaders and teachers to continue to drive best practice to enable learners. It is often the isolation of the classroom that may have an adverse effect. By opening up classrooms in a transparent way to cultivate professional learning cultures where

teachers and learners learn together may result in positive outcomes for all.

Theme 3: More Effective Learning Conversations

Knight (2016) points out that schools need to strive to encourage teachers to engage with each other in a more deliberate way to discuss various aspects of teaching and learning. Through the facilitation of these learning conversations, principals not only model the behaviour they want to see within their teams, but they also encourage better conversations regarding the children’s learning.

Senior Leader 1 (SL1) in School 1 explained as follows:

By working more closely with the school principal, I was being mentored by her to enable me to mentor others, to discuss self-directed learning. I felt energised to share my ideas with others, but what was most remarkable was that the more I did this, the more they started to think more creatively about their own work. They took ownership of it, and the mentoring conversations gave them agency to not only use what they picked up from their training sessions, they started to read more widely and developed their own ideas as well. (SL1)

Active learners were developed through mentoring relationships. The participants not only started to reflect on their own practices, but at times also challenged themselves regarding their practices, and as reflexive practitioners, educators started to drive their own journey through their own agency to find solutions to support learners (Door, 2017; Durrant, 2019). Mentoring provided the platform through which educators were able to make sense of what was happening and how issues were addressed by directing their own learning as critical thinkers (Door, 2017; Weick, 1995). Moving through the transmission and transitional phases of professional learning, educators were enabled to become transformational in their learning as a result of their practice. They were able to self-direct their learning and develop their practices to meet the needs of learners by using self-directed learning.

I hosted mentor meetings every Wednesday, and I became more and more excited every week about what will happen. Teachers started to bring examples of their work to share, and they showed me how they used a wide range of strategies to allow learners to access resources and learning and how they made the learning not only enjoyable, but accessible, and effective. My role became that of a facilitator rather than driving the thinking. I asked good questions, and at times, I had to also make the case to the principal to allow new ideas to be used. We moved from never talking about classroom practice to never not talking about it. (SL2)

The above comment highlights how the leader’s role changed within the mentoring conversation as is also described by Blanchard et al. (2018). It shifted from being directive to non-directive to being supportive, providing support for innovation and creative ideas. The agency of the teaching team was becoming a strength to be celebrated (Durrant, 2019). For

self-directed learning to be fully adopted in classrooms, leaders need to play their part in enabling staff in a trusted way to take risks, explore, and consider how it needs to work. What it should look like within the mentors' contexts with their specific learner demographics is another critical aspect to be considered. Mentoring as a cognitive leadership skill provides a safe space where such innovations can happen and collaborative professionalism can flourish (Cameron & Green, 2020; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The transformative power of the mentor relationship is key to deepen the professional learning of teachers to ensure that self-directed learning becomes part of the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) of teaching and learning practices within classrooms (Kennedy, 2005).

Theme 4: Improved Teaching and Learning Practices

Due to the collaborative nature of mentoring, providing a co-constructive, self-directed learning environment for teachers enabled them to take risks and to try new ideas. Teachers can work collaboratively in planning, discussing practice, and sharing new ideas on how to support learners (Knight, 2016). It removed barriers, and provided high challenge where the mentor provided guidance and advice, but also asked good questions to drive the professional learners' thinking (Myatt, 2016; Oberholzer & Boyle, 2023). Mentorship moves professional learning from transmission and transitional learning to where learning becomes transformational (Kennedy, 2005).

Where mentorship allows for agency and embraces innovation, teachers can truly become transformational in their approach through evidence-informed practice. Teacher 2 at School 2 commented as follows:

I was very lucky, my mentor was the principal of the school, and she encouraged me to delve deeper into self-directed learning. I came across articles via google scholar, and worked my way through it, and identified strategies I was keen to use in my classroom. I talked it through with her, and we considered how it will work, and I was encouraged to adapt the strategies further to ensure that it works well for my class. I tried the ideas out the next day, and the principal dipped into my lesson to see how it is working. We were both very excited about the outcomes, and we shared the ideas in our newsletter and at staff briefing. Colleagues found the reading I shared on these ideas helpful too. We are now working on a framework of ideas for my year group to share with the team as well. (T2)

Teacher 2's reflections regarding her journey and how her mentor facilitated her thinking is a key example of how reflective and reflexive practice may be used to refine teaching and learning practices for not only one individual but for the entire organisation. Cameron and Green (2020) point out that change often starts with individual change,

which leads to group and organisational change. For self-directed learning to become an embedded cultural shift within classrooms, it is key for mentorship and support of teachers to transform their practices beyond the transmission and transition phases of their learning. The principal's support by planning ideas with the member of staff and visiting classrooms to observe lessons is an excellent example of the support required, and how the staff member was encouraged to share her practice with others. Schools need to embrace mentorship to not only develop staff but also to develop leadership capacity in a similar way to drive school improvement and to refine teaching and learning practices further.

Theme 5: Collaborative Professionalism and Continuous Learning

Teachers often find that they are isolated within their classrooms due to the day-to-day demands of their roles. However, Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) emphasise the importance of collaborative professional practices to not only create learning communities but also develop opportunities to collaborate and learn together. Schools are rich places of learning where professionals are in a privileged position to engage with each other creatively to find solutions to help learners grow. However, schools often become hotspots where workloads are challenging and deadlines are driven (Myatt, 2016), and where teachers find it difficult to reach out and to work with each other. School principals, through the mentorship of their teams, may transform these spaces into rich learning spaces where others may learn, grow, and become the best they need to be for the learners and communities they serve.

Planning with staff, modelling practice, showcasing best practice, and celebrating staffs' achievements are a few examples of how principals may mentor their teams to drive self-directed learning to become an embedded practice within their school's teaching and learning repertoire. Buck (2016) and Myatt (2016) state that leaders need to think about how the culture of the school and the climate of the school need to reflect the learning culture and opportunities for learners.

Hattie (2012) points out that dialogical learning and learning with others improves learning outcomes. These principles also applied to the teaching staff who established a community where learning could take place at all levels with the children at the heart of the practice. Essentially, learners will be able to progress and excel and experience life chances to enable them to flourish as adults.

PS1 explained that, as the project unfolded, the culture of learning for teachers changed as well.

I realised that teacher training is just one way of developing staff. It is a transmission stage, and a stimulus for our thinking. We then need to think what

we shall do with the information, and how it will work for our school. I work with my leadership team, and staff to unravel the 'how' and 'what,' and we now discuss how we shall shape it moving forward. We also realise that our professional growth needs to happen all the time, and it is through our engagement with our learning that we can innovate and find new solutions for our children. Our school community now sees ourselves as a school with a mentoring culture. We work together to identify issues, research, and find solutions, and work together on addressing it, planning ways forward to improve. We are active learners and direct our own learning just like we want the children to do. We are now a collaborative community of learning, and the children see that, and it inspires them to learn too. (PS1)

Connor and Pokora (2017) point out that mentoring and coaching are learning relationships that, the more they are cemented, the more likely it becomes that through the communities of learning, schools will improve and find solutions to meet the needs of learners. Initiatives such as self-directed learning will become part of the teaching and learning practices of a school, as it will be driven by the educators for the school through the mentorship of leaders.

The cycle of learning and professional learning is a continuous process, and school leaders need to embrace it through the mentorship of others to enable educators to creatively find solutions for all children in schools, to enable us to drive social mobility.

Conclusion

By developing effective learning relationships through mentoring, a culture of collaborative professionalism among educators becomes more self-directive in their own learning to facilitate self-directed learning in their classrooms. Leaders, and principals in particular, need to consider how they work with their teams to drive pedagogical change through mentorship rather than leave educators without clarity and in isolation to find their own way. Such lack often leads to mistrust and a lack of confidence in how to move the new initiative forward. School leaders need to understand how to move their staff from the transmissional phase of learning to the transitional, and then to the transformational phase of professional learning to help unlock their potential, and the help them find solutions for their learners in a bespoke way by considering how new initiatives can work for them in their classrooms.

The authors acknowledge some limitations of the study. Although it was a small-scale study, it has the potential to progress as part of future projects to support principals in developing mentorship as well as coaching strategies to support their teams to drive school improvement. By embedding teaching and learning processes such as self-directed learning to transform the teaching and learning cultures within

schools, mentoring is undoubtedly a means to an end. The authors aim to continue developing mentoring and coaching practices within diverse school settings to enable principals to develop strong teaching and learning relationships with their teams, thus enabling them to support learners to flourish. Phase 2 of this project aims aim to evaluate how mentoring and coaching impacts on the professional learning of educators, to continue to drive the culture of teaching and learning and school improvement with a focus on self-directed learning even further. The authors argue the continuous cycle of school improvement needs to be aligned with the continuous cycle of professional learning through mentoring and coaching, and with Phase 2 of the project we aim to investigate this in more depth.

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Authors' Contributions

The order in which the authors' names are presented reflect the authors' contributions and lead on the article.

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