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CollectivED

**Working papers from CollectivED;
The Hub for Mentoring and Coaching**

A Research and Practice Centre at
Carnegie School of Education

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Talking Matters

A Thinkpiece Working Paper by Rachel Lofthouse

This is a quick reflective piece, not a full blown working paper, think of it as a second editorial if you like.

Recently I have had the privilege of working with a wide range of teachers, student teachers and school leaders in sessions that are quite unusual for me. For the most part they were one-off sessions, some with people I may never meet again. They were each convened by others rather than me; one was a professional development conference in an international school, one an evening seminar in my role as visiting professor. Further discussions were with teachers and leaders of teacher research in a local school, about 70 student teachers at various stages of training, NQTs and NQT+1 attending a Saturday support event and newly appointed SLEs. In each case I asked the participants a simple question; 'Who do you talk to about your work in education and why?'.

I asked this question because if you search for images of teachers or teaching they are nearly always pictured alone, or as the single adult amongst a sea of pupils. 'Leaders' are also often depicted as figureheads or apparently

visionary people, shouldering the role independently.

Away from the staffroom teaching can seem a solitary endeavour. It is easy to read the teacher standards in England as criteria waiting for you to prove your individual worth. Even once qualified navigating your chosen career path can create a sense that you need to be the chosen one. Teaching can make you feel that it is you against the world (both in triumph and in defeat), and learning to teach and maintaining your success as a teacher or school leader can be assumed to be down to the individual.

CollectivED (as the name of our research and practice centre suggests) is about the power of the 'collective' in supporting and sustaining professional development, practice and learning. Whether through engaging in mentoring, coaching, or activities which rely on professional conversations, we focus on how educators (at all career stages, in all sectors and in a wide range of roles) can thrive through learning and working together.

I also ask this question because I believe it matters. It draws our attention to an important focus – our ‘work in education’ – which relates to our practices in our own professional contexts and recognises that our own work matters. By asking ‘*who* do you talk to’ we recognise the potential of a wide range of connections that we make, both formal and informal, within and beyond our places of work, and also that the people who we choose to talk to matter to us. By asking ‘*why*’ we acknowledge that these conversations help us to address our needs, which might be related to our working environment, our specific roles, our past experiences and possible futures, our values, our dilemmas, our triumphs and our emotions.

What this question doesn’t do (deliberately) is start with a deficit, or assume there is a problem to be solved through conversations with others, or demand that we as educators engage in monitoring or self-surveillance of our work. I stress that because in that respect that’s a different starting place from many professional conversations or interactions. I also use ‘we’ rather than ‘you’ or ‘they’ as I believe that this question is relevant to us all, whatever our role in education.

A range of responses were elicited by the question across the groups of participants in these discussions. There were some

interesting contrasts between groups but I won’t go in to those here. In most conversations it was clear that we talk to partners, family members, colleagues (although more frequently it seems ex-colleagues) and peers (as student teachers) about our work. There was a strong sense that these people provided reassurance, perspective and advice, challenged our thinking and sometimes enabled us to change our decision-making regarding our work. It was also interesting to discover how relatively infrequently our current colleagues were identified as the people we talked to about our work. Maybe this was simply because the participants in the discussion thought that was not the answer I wanted, or maybe it tells us that the time, license and structures to talk to our colleagues about our work is in short supply.

The qualities of the conversations we do have, and the reasons for seeking out the people we talk to, seem pertinent to me. Have we squeezed out our social thinking time in schools, does it matter that few of us have staffrooms that we can chill out in and share what we are doing with colleagues, are our meetings consumed by some-one else’s agenda and the need to engage in the accountability culture?

Quite a few of our working papers in this issue (like the former issues) highlight the value of professional conversations. These can emerge through defined professional development approaches, such as lesson study, learning rounds or mentoring in initial teacher education. They can also develop through coaching for a wide range of purposes, not least the sense of solidarity that can emerge when we start to talk in real depth with people who share our concerns, and who can support our own thinking. Professional conversations also emerge through our participation in conferences, and through deliberately designed courses such as those which enable inter-professional learning.

All of these practices, and more, are discussed in this issue of CollectivED working papers. I hope that this issue of working papers offers you something new to reflect on, as well as helping to further develop your thinking and practice in an area that you are already familiar. Most of all I hope that you take time to talk to someone about something that you have read here. Who knows what that conversation might lead to.

