

REIMAGINING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE IMPACT OF REMOVING LESSON DROP-INS ON TEACHER GROWTH, CONFIDENCE, AND WELLBEING IN A HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL

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Introduction

In recent years, the educational community has increasingly examined the tension between performance monitoring and professional growth. In high-performing schools, where academic excellence is a given, the question arises: how can we ensure continued teacher development without undermining autonomy, trust, and wellbeing?

This article explores the outcomes my action research project conducted at Deira International School in Dubai. The study investigated the impact of removing lesson drop-ins; a widely used quality assurance strategy on teacher professional development, self-confidence, and wellbeing. The findings challenge traditional assumptions about observation-based QA and offer a compelling case for a shift toward coaching-led, trust-based models.

Why Challenge Lesson Drop-Ins?

Lesson drop-ins have been a staple of QA practices in British schools since the 1990s, often serving dual purposes of feedback and accountability. Although modern iterations are typically framed as supportive and developmental, their effectiveness and impact on teacher morale have come under renewed scrutiny.

Initial surveys at Deira International School revealed that staff overwhelmingly preferred coaching conversations to lesson drop-ins when it came to professional growth. Teachers reported that while drop-ins provided visibility and feedback, they also carried connotations of surveillance and performance judgment. This prompted a deeper investigation into alternative, less intrusive forms of teacher development.

Theoretical Foundations

This research was grounded in several well-established educational theories:

- **Instructional Leadership Theory** (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985): Suggests that regular classroom visits enable leaders to drive instructional improvement. However, when used as compliance tools rather than developmental dialogue, they risk becoming counterproductive.
- **Self-Efficacy Theory** (Bandura, 1997): Highlights that teachers who feel competent and confident are more effective. Affirming feedback, more likely in trusting coaching environments, boosts self-efficacy.
- **Surveillance Theory** (Foucault, 1977): Warns that constant observation may create anxiety, reduce innovation, and erode professional trust.
- **Cognitive Load Theory** (Sweller, 1988): Notes that unexpected drop-ins can increase cognitive and emotional stress, hindering teaching performance.
- **Organizational Learning Theory** (Argyris & Schön, 1978): Emphasises that schools improve when cultures of transparency and adaptive feedback are in place; something achievable through coaching rather than surveillance.

These theoretical insights shaped both the design and analysis of the research project.

Methodology

The study focused on four experienced teachers and followed a mixed-methods approach over one academic year. It began with a baseline professional development survey and the setting of individual growth goals. Teachers participated in more frequent, regular coaching conversations and self-directed professional learning, with no formal lesson drop-ins or unscheduled observations. Instead, evidence of progress was gathered through open invitations to observe teaching, reflective dialogue through regular coaching sessions, and a final impact survey. The approach emphasized autonomy, trust, and a shift from performance monitoring to developmental mentoring.

Key Findings

The results of this pilot project were compelling:

- 100% of teachers met their professional development goals with clear evidence.
- 100% believed the absence of drop-ins was a positive change for the school.
- None felt their professional progress had been hindered by the lack of drop-ins.
- 100% reported that the experience reshaped how they viewed quality assurance and professional growth.
- All teachers rated their overall professional wellbeing 7/10 or higher, with 50% noting an improvement from the previous year.

Teachers described the new approach as “authentic,” “empowering,” and “relaxed,” fostering professional risk-taking, increased collaboration, and deeper self-reflection. One teacher commented that the absence of drop-ins “created a space for more honest conversations and less performative teaching.”

Implications for Leadership and Development

The research supports the argument that the removal of lesson drop-ins can enhance—not hinder; teacher development, provided the right conditions are in place. These include:

- A coaching culture that promotes reflection and goal setting
- Trust-based relationships between leaders and teachers
- Access to self-directed and collaborative PD opportunities
- Clear communication and mutual accountability

Significantly, the findings highlight that experienced teachers thrive when trusted to lead their own development. They also point to the importance of moving from QA systems that focus on monitoring to ones that prioritize support and growth.

Limitations and Next Steps

This was a small-scale study involving four established teachers. While the results are promising, they may not be generalizable across all contexts; particularly for less experienced teachers who may still benefit from structured observation and guided feedback.

Future iterations of this research will need to:

- Include a more diverse group of teachers at different stages of their careers
- Examine how to personalise support for those who require more targeted developmental feedback
- Explore hybrid models that integrate coaching with optional, non-evaluative observations

Nevertheless, the findings offer a meaningful step toward rethinking how QA and PD can be approached in high-performing schools.

Conclusion

The removal of lesson drop-ins at Deira International School showed to have a positive impact on teacher development, confidence, and wellbeing. The research suggests that fostering professional growth does not require constant observation, but rather, thoughtful structures that empower teachers through trust, collaboration, and meaningful dialogue.

As schools globally grapple with retaining great teachers and promoting sustainable development models, the insights from this study provide a compelling case for letting go of legacy systems in favour of those that truly serve educators' needs.

In high-performing schools, it may be time to ask: Do we really need to look over someone's shoulder to help them grow and for what purpose would we need to visit lessons to verify a tick list of strategies?

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