



School  
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Hub

## Case study

# Inspire Learning Partnership



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# Trust-led school improvement model

The CST conceptual model for trust improvement is structured as a triple helix, consisting of three strands:

## Curate clear goals

Defining clear purposes, strategies and goals, so that the trust knows what it's aiming for and how to get there

## Build capability and capacity

Shaping the people, culture and capacity within the organisation, in order to create the conditions for sustainable improvement

## Implement improvement initiatives

The ongoing process of implementing improvement, iterating and refining as plans are enacted

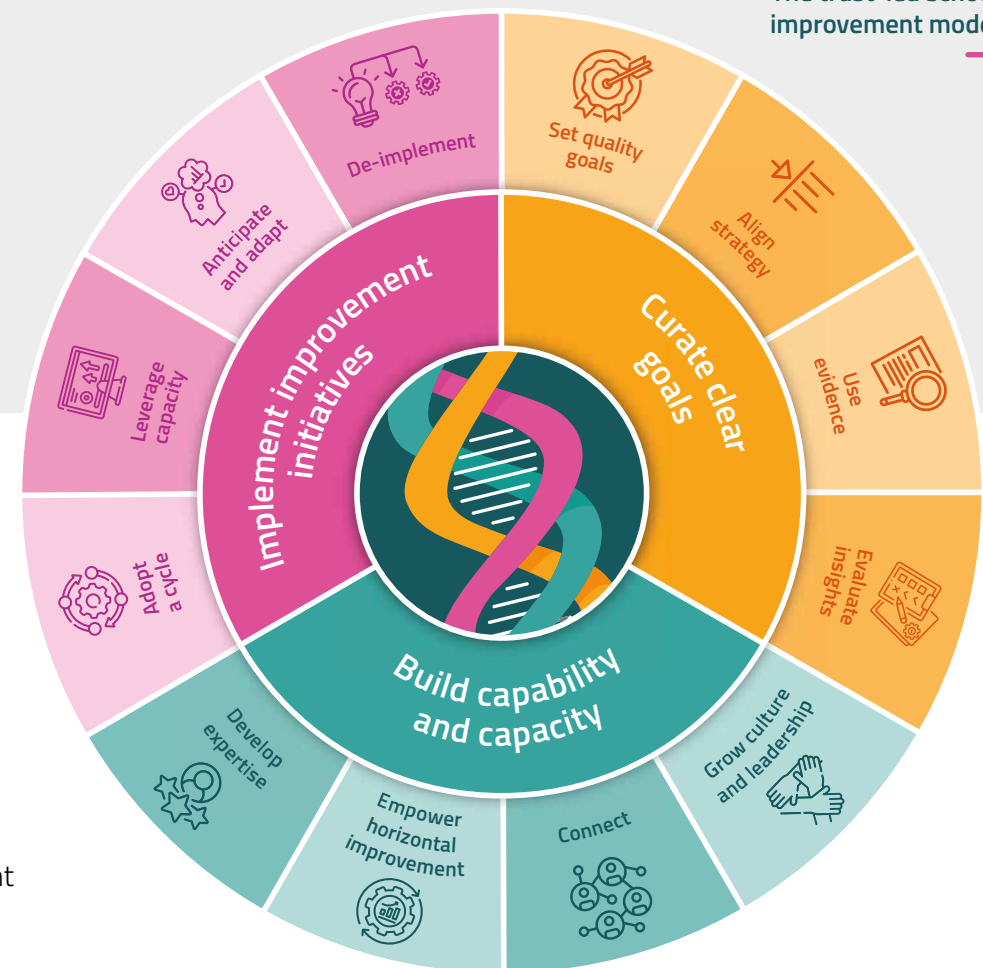
The model outlines the key aspects of how a school-improvement process, strategy or model might be enacted within a trust. Rather than dictating areas for improvement, the conceptual model allows each trust to apply its own understanding of quality and its own improvement goals to each of the three strands. The model is intended to help trusts trace a pathway from the areas their improvement strategy

intends to address towards a broader consideration of how they achieve their improvement goals.

Each of the strands then breaks down into further components. The "Build capability and capacity" strand, therefore, breaks down into these components:

- Develop expertise
- Empower horizontal improvement
- Connect
- Grow culture and leadership

## The trust-led school improvement model



# Case study: Inspire Learning Partnership

This case study highlights the following components in the conceptual model:



## Develop expertise

Put expertise and professional learning at the heart of improvement



## Connect

Build connections across the organisation



## Empower horizontal improvement

Improve practice across a group of schools simultaneously, rather than just one school at a time



## Grow culture and leadership

Establish a culture where leadership and teaching can flourish



## TRUST OVERVIEW

**Trust:** Inspire Learning Partnership

**CEO:** Claire Lowe

**Founded:** 2014

**Schools:** Four primary schools with two nurseries and one infant school, all in the city of Southampton or elsewhere in Hampshire

**School sizes:** The largest school in the trust, Blackfield Primary School and Nursery, has 435 students. The smallest, Fawley Infant School, has 44 pupils on roll.

**Percentage of disadvantaged students:** 55% of pupils are eligible for pupil premium

**Percentage of students receiving free school meals:** 45.8%

**Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language:** 10.6%

**Key stage 2:** 49% of pupils achieved the expected standard in all three of reading, writing and maths (There were contextual reasons why this was lower than expected.)





## BACKGROUND

The Inspire Learning Federation was established in October 2014, made up of Blackfield Primary and Nursery and Fawley Infant School, both in Hampshire. In May 2018, it combined with another small trust to create the Inspire Learning Partnership.

There are currently five schools (two with nurseries) in the trust, spread across two hubs: the original schools and nursery in Hampshire, and Hightown Primary and Kanes Hill Primary, in Southampton. St Monica Primary, a sponsored academy, joined the trust – and the Southampton hub – in May 2022.

In total, the trust serves around 1,500 pupils. Both hubs are in areas of high deprivation – ranging from between 35 and 80 per cent pupil premium – which come with accompanying safeguarding challenges. Hightown is listed among the 10 most deprived primary schools in the country.

“I would refer to Southampton as like the London Challenge of old,” says Amanda Johnston, the ILP’s director of primary education and trust designated safeguarding lead. “Our children live predominantly in flats – often in tower blocks – without access to immediate outside space. Rates of unemployment and domestic abuse are high.”



*“We need teachers who are passionate, committed and resilient, in order to make a difference. And the curriculum has to be geared around children not only learning but also keeping themselves safe.”*

*Amanda Johnston, director of primary education and trust designated safeguarding lead, Inspire Learning Partnership*

This context shapes the trust’s mission and focus. Its vision is: “Raising the educational outcomes of all children within the trust. Never forgetting that children only get one chance at education, we are driven by a commitment to improve children’s life chances.” Its mission distils this into: “Transforming lives, building futures”.

Teacher recruitment in the area is a significant challenge, and the trust has invested in workload-reduction measures and wellbeing support, as well as in high-quality and sustainable continuing professional development.

“We need teachers who are passionate, committed and resilient, in order to make a difference,” Ms Johnston says. “And the curriculum has to be geared around children not only learning but also keeping themselves safe.”

## WHAT DOES EDUCATION LOOK LIKE AT INSPIRE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP?

**“We’re Inspire Learning Partnership – learning is at our core, and integral to all we do with staff and children,” says Ms Johnston.**

ILP is consistently developing strategies to mitigate pupils’ disadvantage. Trust staff have worked with Marc Rowland, an expert in the effective use of pupil-premium funding and in improving outcomes for underserved learners, to ensure that these strategies are as effective as possible. The trust has also created its own internal alternative provision, to support pupils with social, emotional and mental-health needs.

Staff are similarly encouraged to put learning at the heart of what they do, for themselves and for their pupils. The trust recommends that staff engage with research and evidence-informed practice as much as possible.

Over the last 18 months, representatives from across the trust, led by a trust principal, have been working together to create an interactive teaching and learning rubric, designed to support pedagogy. The aim is that staff will use it to support their own developmental journey and that of their colleagues. It can also be used by schools outside the trust that receive support from ILP.







Accessed via the trust's SharePoint, the interactive rubric covers the core areas of pedagogy. If a teacher clicks on any given area, they will be able to access evidence-informed research and practical classroom tips. They will also have access to videos of staff demonstrating the skills relevant to that particular area. Staff are invited to submit videos if they think they are doing something noteworthy in the classroom. This video then goes through a quality-assurance process.

Staff are also being actively encouraged to video their practice using Iris educational software, for professional-development purposes. So, for example, a teacher might video themselves focusing on oracy in the classroom. Then they would share the video with a coaching partner or coaching triad for discussion. "It gives people a talking point and encourages self-reflection," Ms Johnston says. "And it directly links into our teaching and learning rubric."

The trust has been working with the University of Southampton to validate the rubric and its modules, in order to provide linked professional-development credits for staff. This will be introduced from September 2025.

"Hopefully staff will use this as a platform to develop further, and ultimately earn credits towards a master's degree," says Ms Johnston. "Peer review and giving staff agency lie at the heart of our strategy for improvement."



***"Peer review and giving staff agency lie at the heart of our strategy for improvement."***

*Amanda Johnston, director of primary education and trust designated safeguarding lead, Inspire Learning Partnership*



## How does this work in practice?

A closer examination of developing expertise and connecting

### Develop expertise: Coaching triads

**ILP places a strong emphasis on self-directed learning, with staff encouraged to take charge of their own development. For the trust executive, this was the appeal of the triad coaching model: it allows staff at all levels an additional perspective on their own learning.**

Developed and refined over a number of years, the triad coaching model is similar to peer coaching: school staff work with colleagues, rather than professional coaches. However, instead of working in pairs, they work in groups of three. Each of the three group members then takes on a different role in turn: coach,

coachee and observer.

As coachee, a staff member would bring to the coaching session an issue to be considered and discussed. After the coachee had presented the issue, the coach would ask probing questions, challenging the coachee's assumptions and offering feedback. The coachee undertakes to respond to these questions openly and honestly.

The coach would not offer solutions and advice, and the coachee would not come to the session expecting to be told what to do. The aim is primarily to encourage the coachee to consider an issue from multiple perspectives and to think about available options for action. They then commit to taking action within a specified time frame.

Where the triad model differs from conventional peer coaching is in the presence of the third teacher: the observer. The observer watches and listens to the coaching conversation, but is not allowed to contribute to it. Instead, they provide feedback to help the coach improve in the role.



## The ILP education-strategy document provides the following instructions for the observer:

The observer watches and listens (never contributes) to the coaching conversation.

The observer provides immediate constructive feedback on what has been said, how it was said, including where the coach stepped outside the coaching role and offered advice and if nonverbal responses were noted, such as body language or voice tone.

Remember, you're observing the coach, not coaching the client, so focus your attention on giving feedback to the coach.

Maintain attention on the coach's learning by resisting offering suggestions to the coachee.

If there is something you want the coachee to know, write it down or reserve time at the end of the entire meeting to share those thoughts and observations.

You may take some notes of what appeared effective in the session, as long as it is not obtrusive.

You might write down specific things the coach said that were very helpful.

If you would have taken the session in a different direction, make note of that (when and how), but do not get distracted by it.

When giving feedback to the coach, deliver your comments in a positive manner and, if possible, make a suggestion that the coach may use in the future.

Always start with a positive comment and end on a positive comment.

When using examples, be concise and specific.

Make a note of the time and remind the coach when there are a few minutes to go so as to allow the coach to wrap up.







### The trust also suggests the following ground rules for the coaching process:

- The purpose of dialogue is to understand and to learn from one another (you cannot win a dialogue).
- All dialogue participants speak for themselves, not as representatives of special interests.
- Treat everyone in a dialogue as an equal: leave role, status and stereotypes at the door.
- Be open and listen to others, even when you disagree, and suspend judgement.
- Search for assumptions (especially your own).
- Listen with empathy to the views of others: acknowledge you have heard the other, especially when you disagree.
- Look for common ground.

The trust's rationale for using the triad model is that the observer role allows participants a perspective that could be lost if staff only worked in pairs. It enables each member of the triad to step back from the intensity of coaching or being coached, to observe the conversation more objectively. This has benefits for the observer, but also for the coach and coachee. In addition, the trust states that the observer role "encourages a more reflective coaching process, enabling all participants to learn from the experience".

## Develop expertise and grow culture and leadership: Developing senior leaders

### 1. Action learning

Senior leaders at ILP are offered their own professional-development programme, which involves half-termly group sessions. Assistant principals come together in one group, and vice-principals and heads of school in another. Both sets of sessions are facilitated by Ms Johnston, the trust's director of primary education and designated safeguarding lead.

Each group has five members – one from each school in the trust. Sessions typically start at 8.30am and finish at lunchtime: keeping to schedule is an important element of the programme.

The session begins with a general check-in on participants' emotional health. How do they feel as they come in to the session? Is there anything Ms Johnston or the other participants need to be aware of? Is there anything they want to disclose to the group or need from the group that day?

This is followed by a half-hour bitesize CPD session on a subject of the group's choosing. Recently, for example, the group requested a session on finance: how finance works in the trust, and what role senior leaders play. The trust finance director delivered a short session for the group and answered questions. Other topics previously covered in this slot include: managing difficult people; adapting your leadership style; risk assessment; and health and safety.

At the end of the CPD session, participants will discuss and agree on the topic for the next session. Often, Ms Johnston will mention something that she's observed in some of the trust's schools or in one-on-one sessions with headteachers; participants will usually agree that this is something they would like to focus on.

Following a short break, the session moves on to its main focus: action learning. Action learning is a problem-solving method that involves taking action and then reflecting on the impact and application of the results. Ms Johnston and ILP CEO Claire Lowe have been using action learning for a number of years, and believe it is a powerful way for school leaders to develop their thinking.

Participants are asked to bring to the group a live issue at their school that they would like the group to support them with. Such issues might include: "A teacher is not performing in the way that they should. How do I tackle that?", "How do I get all staff to see the value of classroom video technology in their professional development?", "How do I make my site team more effective?" or "How do I improve the culture in my school?"

The group determines the order in which participants present their issue. Occasionally, when a problem is particularly pressing or has been causing them real worry, a participant might ask to go first.







Each participant has a designated half-hour slot, which means that discussion has to move along at a speedy pace. (This is why group numbers are restricted to five: "If it got any bigger, we would have to run action learning all day," Ms Johnston says.) If a participant requests longer than half an hour, the group must agree collectively whether or not it will allow it.

During their individual slot, a senior leader will tell the group about the problem that is concerning them and explain the desired outcome. For example: "There's a year group where pupil data shows underperformance. I know pupils' outcomes could be better. My desired outcome is that teacher pedagogy and children's outcomes will improve."

"Explaining the desired solution just helps to frame our thinking," says Ms Johnston. Though, she notes: "Sometimes the desired outcomes change through the session."

The group then asks coaching questions of the senior leader, based on the information given. Sometimes members will challenge the leader: "I don't agree with you, because..." or "Have you considered what their perspective might be, because..."

"There's always a 'because,'" says Ms Johnston. "We want people to speak up if they think things aren't right. Psychological safety is a core element of our work together."

"It's a really collaborative approach. I'm last to speak, and I try to speak as little as possible. I just facilitate. If the group gets stuck, I might say, 'I wonder if...' or suggest some educational, leadership or psychological theory, just to move things on."

Once the senior leader has answered all the questions, the group will work together to create an action plan that the leader commits to take back to their school and implement.

At the start of the following session, Ms Johnston will then invite participants to give a brief update on the situation discussed the previous week: has the action-learning process helped? And, if so, how? What did the participant learn about their leadership through the change process?

"Action learning has been quite transformational for our leaders," she says. "It's given them agency to solve problems, knowing there's a collaborative backbone in the trust to support them."

"People have connected and developed an understanding of one another's roles. Now we have a network.' The nature of working this way has added benefits."





## 2. Individual sessions

In addition to half-termly action-learning sessions, principals and executive principals also have one-to-one sessions with Ms Johnston or Ms Lowe. These meetings take place either weekly or fortnightly, and will typically last for one and a half to two hours.

As with the group sessions, these begin with a personal check-in. "I'm interested in how that person is showing up that day," says Ms Johnston. "Are they okay personally and professionally? Do they need any support with workload? What's going on for them as a human? We always prioritise them as humans first."

Next, they look at what the trust refers to as "the three Ss": safeguarding, standards and stakeholders. Ms Johnston will ask coaching questions linked to the trust's school-improvement priorities, holding the principal to account for the work they're doing. They will also work together to identify any areas where support is needed.

"It's to ensure that school improvement continues to have momentum," says Ms Johnston. "What have we done? What's the result? It's really easy to get distracted from the main thing, otherwise."

At the end of each half term, Ms Johnston will circulate the information collated during these weekly sessions to the broader team: the trust CEO, the finance director and the relevant headteacher. The executive team will then meet for an hour and a half with each school leadership team to review the half-term just gone. What is going well? Where is support needed? Where is challenge needed? Who's accountable for these areas where support or challenge is needed?







The aim is that there should be no surprises during these meetings: nothing will be raised that has not already been covered during one-to-one sessions with Ms Johnston. The focus is therefore: how are we going to work collaboratively to ensure the best possible outcomes for the school?

The school is given the agenda in advance of the meeting. There is an expectation that school leaders will present information, and the central team will ask questions designed to challenge and support school leadership. It is not always the principal or executive principal who presents – if, for example, school data highlights a potential concern with maths outcomes, the maths or assessment lead can come and talk about the data. It is left to school leaders to decide who would be the most useful people to bring along to the meeting. Similarly, the principal is encouraged to identify where they need support from the central team.

The agenda for these team meetings will vary in emphasis at different times of the year. So, when school budgets are set, the focus will be on budget and staffing. All areas of focus, however, are always related to pupil outcomes and safeguarding.

And if the school has particularly complex issues to discuss – for example, around staffing or standards – there is scope for the meeting to last longer than an hour and a half. The aim is that everyone involved should leave the meeting with a clear understanding of how things are going to move forwards, leading to further improved outcomes for pupils.

## Empower horizontal improvement and connect: Middle-leadership programme

**ILP also has an internal programme for middle leaders and aspiring middle leaders: the Inspire Learning Institute. This offers sessions for ambitious middle leaders, led by Amanda Johnston and the trust CEO, Claire Lowe.**

Middle leaders from across the trust – teaching and non-teaching – put themselves forward for the programme, which is run on an annual basis. Up to 12 middle leaders can participate at any one time – the trust tries to recruit participants in multiples of three, so that the programme can include coaching-triad work.

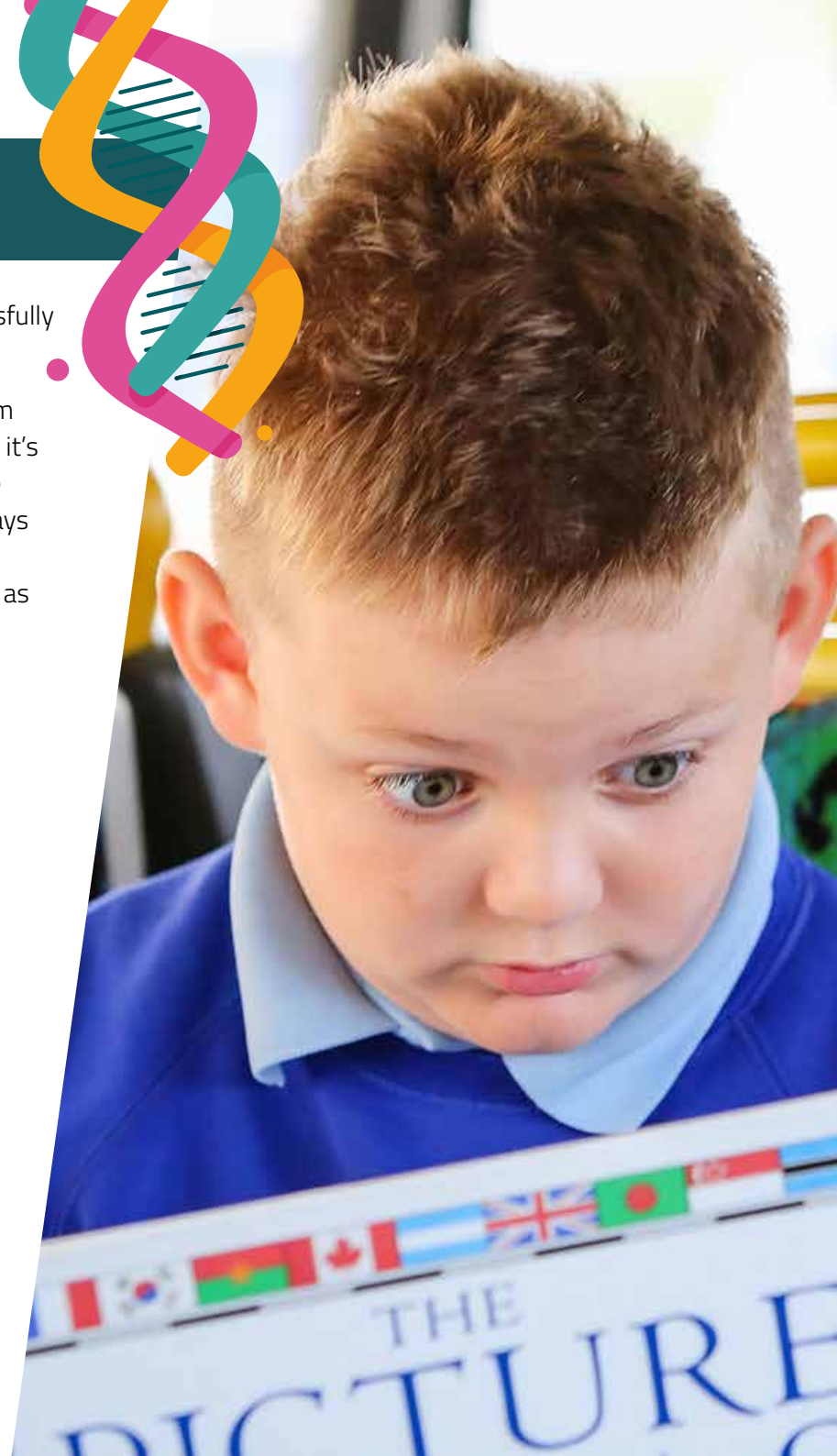
There are between three and six sessions per course. The number of sessions depends on the make-up of the particular group: “Where they are on their leadership journey and what they need,” Ms Johnston says. Each session is two and a half hours long, delivered jointly by Ms Johnston and Ms Lowe. Areas of focus include: what it means to be a leader; how leaders live by their vision and values; how to have difficult conversations; how to work with people; how to seek feedback; how to be vulnerable; and how to show impact in your area of expertise.

For example, the session on difficult conversations would begin with Ms Johnston examining what qualifies as a difficult conversation: what does it look

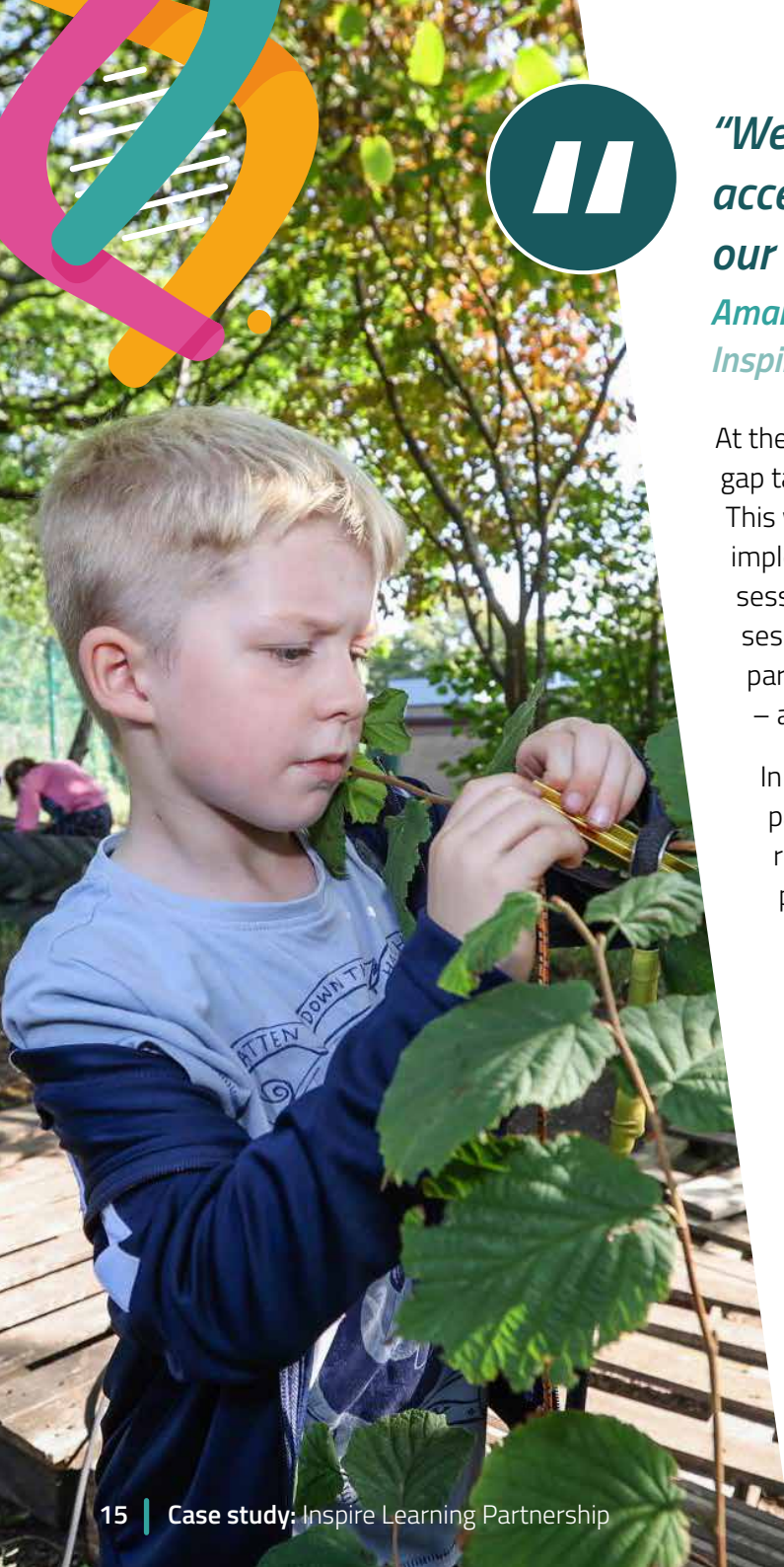
like? What’s the theory behind successfully negotiating a difficult conversation?

They are asked to bring a problem from their own professional lives. “Whether it’s to do with a pupil, a parent or a course leader – there’s always something,” says Ms Johnston. “We begin with the pupil problems. As the course progresses – as their confidence grows – it becomes more about dealing with colleagues. For example, a colleague isn’t fulfilling the marking policy. Or a colleague is continually missing deadlines. Or a colleague needs support developing their pedagogy. What do I do about that?”

Participants then go into their coaching triads and practise having a difficult conversation, using the example they have brought to the session. They are encouraged to approach the conversation using the STORM model: state the issue, their side, options, resolution, move and follow up. Participants are also given a sample script that they can take back to their own schools.







***“We’ve tried to debunk the myth that only teachers and LSAs should access this style of CPD. Every member of staff is really important in our trust.”***

*Amanda Johnston, director of primary education and trust designated safeguarding lead, Inspire Learning Partnership*

At the end of each session, participants are given a gap task, to be completed before their next session. This will involve going back to their schools and implementing some of the learning from the session. From the second week onwards, every session opens with a discussion of what actions participants have taken since the previous session – and what the outcome and impact was.

In addition to the task between sessions, participants will take on a longer-term project, running across the length of the entire programme. This project will be based on their area of responsibility and school-improvement priorities. For example, a maths subject lead might suggest a research question such as: “How can teaching explicit problem-solving strategies, with deliberate practice, improve pupil outcomes?” The lead will then work on this issue themselves and with their team.

Programme participants can also access three online sessions with an external coach. “It’s an opportunity to develop coaching skills further and work on the input they’ve had during the course,” Ms Johnston says.

“It’s about how to get the best out of people. It’s one thing being a teacher, but it’s another thing looking at how to bring out the best in adults. Those coaching sessions are designed with that in mind – how to develop those skills.”

The trust is keen to emphasise that the programme is not only for teachers and LSAs. Participants so far include one of the trust’s family liaison officers and a member of the behaviour team. “We’ve tried to debunk the myth that only teachers and LSAs should access this style of CPD,” says Ms Johnston. “Every member of staff is really important in our trust.”

By the end of the programme, middle leaders have made connections with their counterparts in other schools across the trust. And, equally importantly, the CEO and head of education have an idea of the strengths of ambitious middle leaders across their trust.

“It’s a little bit of a talent-scouting exercise,” says Ms Johnston. “For example, if you have a writing need in your school, I have someone who really knows how to improve writing, and has sufficient skills to support colleagues with that. Then the CEO or I can deploy them to support another school, either in the trust or beyond.”

# Key points

- Learning – including staff learning – is at the heart of what the trust does, with a strong emphasis on self-directed, evidence-informed learning, and on giving staff agency to pursue this
- Use of the triad coaching model offers trust staff the benefits of peer coaching, while also allowing participants the opportunity to step back and view a coaching conversation as an impartial observer
- Group sessions for middle leaders allow participants to tackle problems collectively, drawing on support from across the trust and building a peer-support network
- These sessions for middle leaders also enable the trust to identify talented and ambitious staff, and to deploy them where they are most needed
- Group sessions for senior leaders enable trust-wide collaboration on challenges facing individual schools
- Senior-leader group sessions create a network of senior leaders from across the trust, who are able to draw on one another for support
- Principals and executive principals are given weekly or fortnightly one-to-one sessions with a trust executive leader, resulting in a collaborative partnership and a culture of no surprises

# Resources

- [Inspire Learning Partnership education strategy](#)
- [Middle leaders' development programme - sample session](#)
- [Accountable talk](#)
- [Action learning: an overview](#)
- [Action research](#)

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