Mentors: what's important? A study of trainee teacher perceptions of effective mentor strategies

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Programmes of teacher training almost universally follow a model of the allocation of an experienced teacher as a mentor in a school placement. This arrangement is intended to help the trainee to understand her experiences, develop her in the skills of teaching, integrate her with the school and ensure the expectations of stakeholders such as the school leadership, government, students and parents, are met. These are complex and sometimes conflicting requirements, meaning the role of mentor is demanding and difficult. The literature commonly refers to the mentor-trainee relationship as being particularly problematic. This study reports on an attempt to identify the most important elements of mentoring by surveying PGCE secondary maths teacher trainees. The results indicate remarkable consistency of the importance of all mentor practices despite highly varied trainee background, knowledge and experience, with no strong skew regarding relationships. The implications of this consistency are considered.

ITT; mentor; teacher educator

Introduction

Someone wanting to train to become a teacher is highly likely to be placed in a school and given a mentor, whether going through the traditional university based PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate of Education) programme, the more recent school based programmes like SchoolDirect, Teach First and Teaching Apprenticeships, or the Assessment Only route. This model became dominant in the UK in the 1990s for both pre-service teachers and newly qualified teachers as it fit well with popular learning theories of the time, including reflection, situated cognition and scaffolding (Hobson & Malderez, 2013), but it is a model that can be found internationally.

The mentor will be involved in virtually all aspects of the training, including: allocating classes; advising on planning, delivery and pupil assessment; giving feedback; and evaluating the outcome. A literature review covering 60 years of research about school mentors found that trainee teachers regard the school placement as the most important part of their training, and the mentor as central to their success, but found a variety of different practices and power dynamics (Clarke, Triggs & Nielsen, 2014). This study addresses these differences in an attempt to find which of the many aspects of the mentor role is the most important for trainee teacher development.

Mentor role

The mentor facilitates learning in a manner appropriate for an adult learner. Knowles (1970) describes how adult learning differs from child learning, in that learning is less

likely to be formalised, and more likely to be self-directed in response to a need, with a clear application in mind. Adults are likely to have more experience from which to draw but also more likely to *want* to draw from it and learn in doing so. Thus the role of the teacher of adults is to facilitate their learning by providing opportunity for exposure to learning environments and giving support for reflection. Mentoring practice also corresponds to Lave and Wenger's (1999) description of situated learning, in which the adult learner participates in a community of practitioners, moving from the periphery at first towards full membership. The learning involved in this journey is decoupled from instruction, instead happening more organically.

The services of a mentor towards the trainee teacher are described differently in different studies, for example Bean, Lucas and Hyers (2014) refer to eight; Clarke, Triggs and Nielsen (2014) refer to eleven and Hobson and Malderez (2013) six. I suggest that the findings can be simplified to six roles: friend (offering respect and emotional support); model (demonstrating teaching skills); guru (developing pedagogical understanding); administrator (organising environment and meeting university administrative requirements); acclimatiser (introducing to school and profession norms, mediating relationships) and judge (advising on knowledge issues, evaluating) (figure 1). Much is made of the relational side of the role, with Totterdell et al. (2008) finding that most studies of mentoring in the first year after training referred to relationships.

However the mentor's role is not only focused on the learning of the adult in her charge. Other responsibilities are towards the school, for whom the mentor is expected to present a member of staff that conforms to the school's ethos, organisational and academic needs; the university, for whom the mentor is expected to fulfil bureaucratic and evaluation requirements; and society, for whom the mentor is expected to generate a skilled and reliable professional. These different roles can conflict: between responsibilities to trainee and society, in that the mentor's relationship with the trainee may affect objective evaluation in a 'gatekeeper' role; between school and ITT provider, in that the school's needs for staffing may not fit with the ITT provider's recommendations for exposure; between the trainee and the ITT provider, in that the mentor's own pedagogical practice and beliefs may not accord with those espoused by the ITT provider; and there are many others (figure 2).
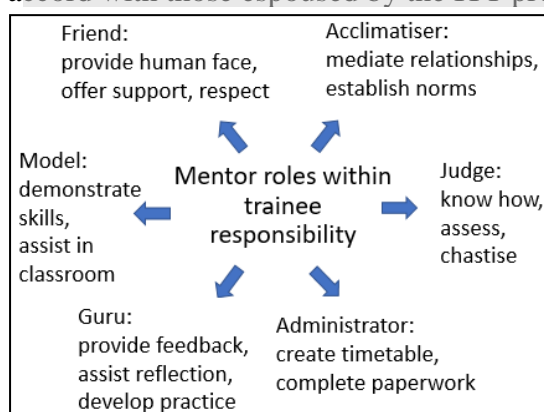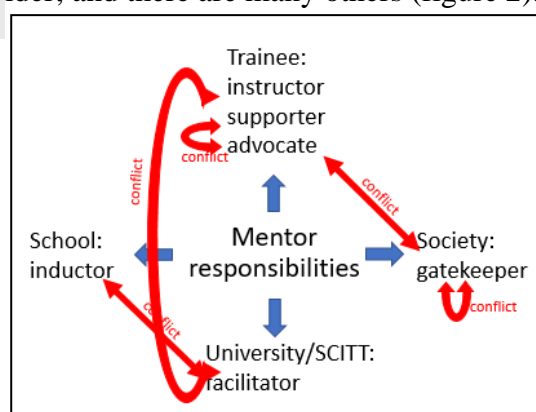
Figure 1: mentor roles

Figure 2: mentor responsibilities

Having a mentor was found to be critically important to training and newly trained teachers (Clarke, Triggs & Nielsen, 2014; Totterdell et al., 2008) and benefits for the mentor and school as well as the training teacher were identified (Hobson et al., 2009). It may be that what is important varies over the duration of the course, as the trainee becomes more confident and independent. Much of the literature (eg

Bradbury and Koballa Jr., 2008) recognises the different needs at different times, describing a journey from pupil, through apprentice, colleague and sometimes co-learner. Ballantyne, Hansford and Packer's (1995) study showed that training teachers valued different functions at different times over the course.

Despite the recognition of the importance of the mentoring role, there is little understanding of HOW mentoring works – which strategies lead to which outcomes (Hobson et al., 2009). There are few attempts to evaluate one strategy or practice over another, but with mentor time being ever more stretched, it would be valuable to know which aspects of the role are most helpful.

Study

The difficulty of evaluating mentor strategies comes in identifying an appropriate measure of success. Judging the effectiveness of mentors on their training teacher's pupils' progress is unsatisfactory as progress is likely to be based on more than the teaching during the practicum. Judging mentor effectiveness on the training teacher's performance exacerbates the issue of conflict between duty as gatekeeper and loyalty to trainee by introducing a vested interest for a mentor's evaluation. Judging mentor effectiveness on the retention of the training teacher within the school or within the profession is likely to be affected by many other factors beyond the mentoring experience. The simplest measure of what strategies are effective is to collect training teachers' opinions regarding what they found helpful. There is a potential limitation in using this measure, as it is likely to be biased towards factors that made their learning easier or less stressful, rather than factors that ultimately made them a better teacher. However collecting the data from trainees who have successfully finished the year goes some way towards ameliorating this limitation, as the positive outcome indicates that the strategies were of pedagogical value.

This study uses a mixed methods methodology to investigate student perceptions of effective mentor strategies. A mixed methods approach is helpful in allowing the researcher to reveal breadth and depth, as quantitative methods can indicate a broad picture using descriptive and inferential statistics, and qualitative methods can be used to understand a situation more deeply. A mixed methods methodology indicates a pragmatic epistemology, in which one recognises that there is no objective reality, but there are generalities of interpretation that can be meaningful to others.

Students in the 2016/7 cohort of the secondary maths PGCE course (n=30) were asked to write comments on helpful or unhelpful practice when they returned to the university after their first placement. These were then analysed inductively and used as the basis for a questionnaire for that cohort (n=24) and the subsequent cohort (n=26) at the end of the respective years. The trainees were asked to first rate the importance of the 14 themes, giving 10 to the most important and 1 to the least, and then rate the extent to which they experienced the factors identified.

Findings

There were 88 comments received from the 30 trainee teachers. Analysis was done inductively, creating codes from themes as they presented themselves as different from existing themes, and no significance was attached to a greater or lesser frequency of comments per theme. Of the initial comments, 54 of the 88 received were identified as positive. Themes emerged of: specific helpful feedback; acknowledging progress; friendliness and positivity; encouraging independence;

practical planning assistance; respect and trust; taking the role seriously; improvement strategies; setting appropriate targets; being generous with time; and reasonableness. When negative comments were added further themes emerged of: understanding the standards; managing other teachers; and own pedagogy. Figure three indicates the numbers of positive comments (in green) and negative comments (in red).

Further reflection resulted in the allocation of themes to four categories: procedural (time, standards, other teachers, role); relational (respect, friendliness, reasonableness); pedagogical (independence, progress, targets, feedback and improvement strategies) and practical (practical assistance, own pedagogy).

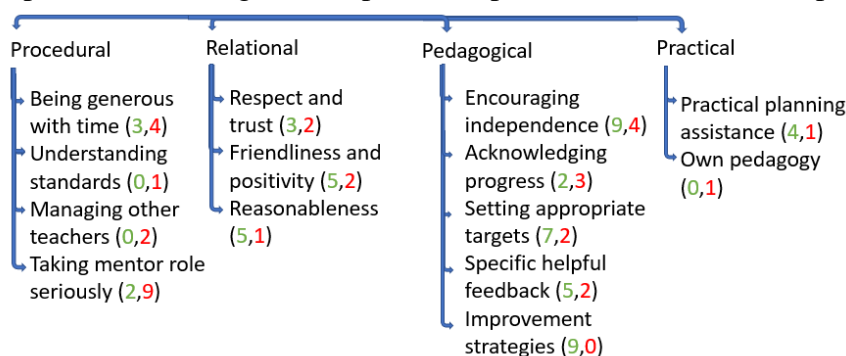| Procedural	Relational	Pedagogical	Practical
Being generous with time (3,4)	Respect and trust (3,2)	Encouraging independence (9,4)	Practical planning assistance (4,1)
Understanding standards (0,1)	Friendliness and positivity (5,2)	Acknowledging progress (2,3)	Own pedagogy (0,1)
Managing other teachers (0,2)	Reasonableness (5,1)	Setting appropriate targets (7,2)	
Taking mentor role seriously (2,9)		Specific helpful feedback (5,2)	
		Improvement strategies (9,0)	

Figure 3: four categories of themes from inductive investigation of trainee comments

The themes were used to survey the two cohorts regarding their rating of what was important and what was actually experienced. The results for both years indicated that the ratings of what was considered important were surprisingly consistent, with very few ratings falling below "5" and the majority being either "8", "9" or "10". The standard deviation across these results was low (between 1 and 2) indicating a strong degree of consistency. The most important in terms of average in 2016/7 were all relational, and relational features were similarly highly rated in 2017/8, but 'encouraging independence' was the most highly ranked. The graph in figure 4 illustrates that relational factors are by no means overwhelmingly rated as more important than other factors.
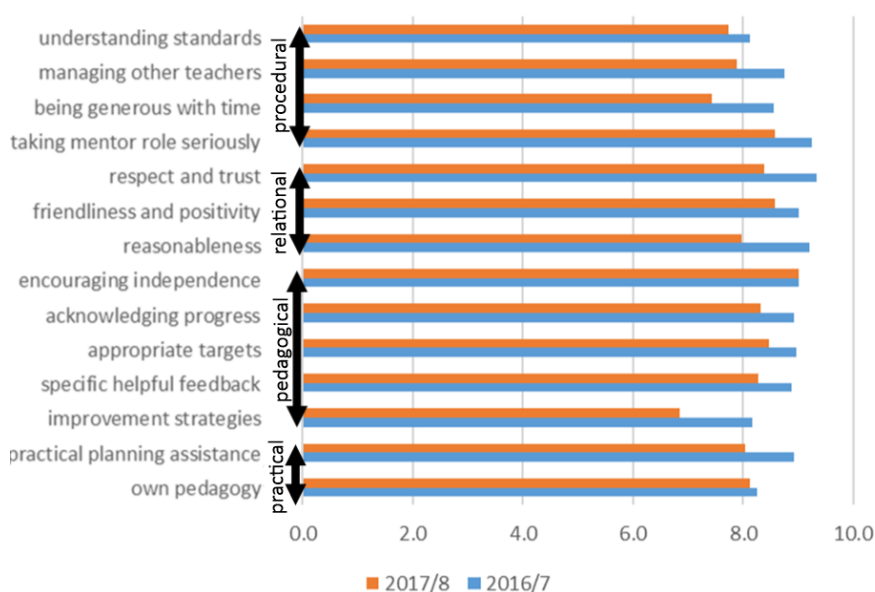

Figure 4: ratings of importance from the two cohorts

To identify whether the ratings of importance are different earlier in the course to later, the questionnaire was given to the current 2018/9 cohort after 8 weeks. These results were compared to the data from 2016/7 and 2017/8. The comparison indicates that there is some difference in the rating of all factors as important. It is possible that this does indicate that trainees have different needs at different stages of the course, and more work will be done on this at the end of the academic year.

Discussion

While the literature does not describe relational aspects as being necessarily more important than other aspects of the mentor role, it is rare that there is not an emphasis on this aspect rather than any other (eg Jones, Kelsey & Brown, 2017). I was surprised therefore to see that relational aspects were not dominant in the trainee teachers' responses, and that there was a high degree of consistency in their evaluations of all aspects of the role. I believe the multiplicity of important factors indicates that this is a highly complex and sophisticated job, corroborating Ambrosetti's (2014) findings. Far from mere emotional cheerleading over the duration of an essentially straightforward training journey, the relational aspect comes about in the course of navigating a very difficult and nuanced set of challenges, in which the "correct" way is hard to define and even harder to direct. Factors such as showing respect and reasonableness are not pleasant features of the mentor's personality, they go much more deeply into the process itself, of knowing the right trainee-appropriate pedagogical (in the mentoring context) strategy to use for the trainee teacher to make progress. A focus on emotional support implies the widely-undervalued soft skills known as "women's work" and serves to undermine the role's complexity.

Further, the nomenclature used for the role is insufficient to describe the multiple aspects of the role. In other school and workplace contexts, mentoring refers to advice and guidance, allowing a mentee to get a different, more strategic perspective on their situation than that thrown up by the moment. This describes only part of the role that a teacher training mentor takes on, and the use of this word does not recognise the dynamic, in-the-moment nature of the job, nor the other, non-mentoring facets. Other more comprehensive words used for this role in the literature include 'cooperating teacher', 'supervising teacher' and 'school-based teacher educator', of which the last seems preferable.

An emphasis on the relational aspect of the role also calls into focus the individual variations in the particular relationships, and allows criticisms of personnel (eg Sudzina & Coolican, 1997) that are not necessarily helpful in understanding and improving the system. It is disrespectful of the people involved to imply that if two people are not getting on it is because of a personality clash. It is superficial to focus on ways in which the relationship is unsuccessful, rather than recognising that the role is necessarily likely to create challenging interactions.

Implications

The Carter Review (2015) recognised that the training of teachers was inconsistent, and one of the recommendations was the improved training of mentors. The outcome of this was a set of mentor standards (DfE, 2016), which however appropriate do not do much to address a commitment to the necessity of serious training for what is a sophisticated and complex job. The formulation of pedagogical knowledge in the

context of mentoring (Jones & Straker, 2006) seems to me to be the first step in understanding how to equip mentors for the challenge, accompanied by a commitment to devoting more time and resources to preparing mentors for the role. The existing informal arrangements are disrespectful and undermining to mentors, and by association, to the teachers they train.

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