

“Mind the Gap!” Exploring the Tensions in Initial Teacher Training: School based Mentor Practices, Student Expectations and University Demands

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Since DFE circular 9/92, school based mentoring has become central to Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in England. We are studying the perspectives, expectations and practices of ITT students, experienced mentors and new mentors. The initial phase of our research is based on questionnaires sent to secondary school ITT students following Physics, Religious Education and History. A questionnaire was designed to explore the differences between the procedural role of mentors, as outlined by the University of Birmingham, and the actual experiences of the students. The research is expected to lead to changes in both mentoring practice and mentor training. This research is the basis for follow up research with experienced mentors and trainee mentors at the University of Birmingham. Since September 2007 we have been researching the role of school based mentors in Initial Teacher Training in England, specifically in the Post-Graduate Certificate of Education course at a University in the West Midlands. We have researched the role from a number of perspectives, including the student teachers', experienced mentors' and recently the new mentors'. Here we focus on the experience of student teachers on their first school placement.

Keywords: mind the gap, tensions, initial teacher training, school based, mentor

Introduction

To start off, a little Greek mythology: in both the Iliad and the Odyssey Homer tells the story of Odysseus was King of Ithaca, he was married to a young beautiful woman called Penelope who had recently given birth to a baby boy they named Telemachus. Everything seemed perfect, except he knew he was going to have to go away to fight in the war at Troy. He also knew he would be away a long time. He tried to avoid going, he feigned madness but he was eventually tricked into going. He left an old friend and adviser called Mentor to advise his wife and guide his young son. Sadly this old man was not really very effective, Penelope was forced to rely on her wits and Athena, goddess of wisdom, disguised herself as Mentor to tutor the young Telemachus. Most references to this tale ignore the simple point that Mentor was a failure. Despite this rather inauspicious start,

mentoring is now a key word in many professions.

Initially mentoring appeared in managerial discourse (Kerry & Skelton 1995) before moving into medical discussions and other professional development (Friedman and Philips 2002). Now the terms “mentor” and “mentoring” have become ubiquitous in the education system in England. A simple search of official websites shows this, the Department for Families, Children and Schools produces 52 hits, whilst the Teaching and Development Agency for Schools a massive 274 hits. With such extensive use the word has become ambiguous; it is so commonly used to describe significantly different activities and processes, it has become the moving knot of discourse analysis' net of language. An example of this is a local primary school where senior staff “mentor” young teachers. The head interprets

this as drinking coffee, whilst chatting about teaching and life in general, gently inducting them into the profession, whereas the deputy head holds meetings at set times with agendas, targets (set by her) and formal observations measured against OFSTED criteria. Furthermore mentoring is used in a wide range of contexts; new headteachers, deputy headteachers, and middle managers are mentored, as are new teachers and struggling teachers, as well as talented pupils, SEN pupils and pupils with behavioural issues. This observation is not new, twelve years ago McIntyre and Hagger commented “We have to be cautious...about assuming that...the term ‘mentor’ can be sensibly used with the same meaning for subject learning as it is for classroom practice, or for new headteachers as it is for newly qualified teachers.” (McIntyre and Hagger 1996, 5).

The word arrived in Initial Teacher Training in England in the early 1990’s. This coincided with significant changes to ITT, as in education generally. In circular 9/92 (DFE 1992) introduced the rule that 2/3 of teacher training had to be done in schools. Suddenly emphasis was placed on school based learning and school based mentors became central to students’ progress as teachers. Three years later a new National Curriculum was introduced for ITT with a set of standards students were no longer being educated to teach, they were being trained (Lowe 2007). This emphasis on ‘the performance of teaching’ over ‘the reflection on teaching’ and lead to a fear that ITT would become an apprenticeship.

“In England there is an apprenticeship model of teaching which attends more to public performance as a teacher than to the learning that is required for responsive teaching. Student teachers very rarely teach alongside more experienced teachers and learn from their modelling and explanation of practice” (Edwards and D’Arcy 2004 152).

Tomlinson produced a simple definition of the mentoring process as

“...assisting student-teachers in learning to teach in school based settings” (Tomlinson 1995.3)

Though this appears to suggest an apprenticeship model, he is explicit elsewhere that learning to teach must be a process of developing reflective practices in the student teachers, suggesting that mentors need to be aware that “...there’s not just one right way...even though we may have our own well-based preferences” (Tomlinson 1995. 29)

Edwards and Collison provide a broader definition of mentoring as “ primarily to induct newcomers into the expectations and procedures that operate” (Edwards & Collison 1996. 22), though they go on to argue that “...mentoring in initial teacher training is much more than that (Edwards & Collison 1996. 22). Sampson and Yeomans (1994) argue that there are three aspects to a mentor’s role, the **structural**; helping them settle into and understand the school, the **personal**; caring for them and minimising their stress and the **professional**; all the activities that relate to them becoming teachers. This multifaceted nature makes flexibility essential. This flexibility is one of the core features of mentoring recognised elsewhere. In her research on mentoring “ fourteen professional black women” in America Breda Bova argues

“Fostering effective mentoring relationships in organizations is a complex process demanding flexibility and an understanding of human interrelations” (Bova 2000.5)

This flexibility is also present in Spicer’s writing on mentoring dentists where he lists the potential roles as “father figure, teacher, facilitator, coach, counsellor, guardian, role model and educational supervisor” (Spicer 2004.472)

Ripon and Martin (2003) constructed a three way model to describe the relations between a mentor and mentee. Their work was based on an empirical study of new entrants into teaching. The models are;

- **Procedural:** this was deemed to be the least satisfactory model. It is a bureaucratic system for supporting young teachers, and as such is relatively unresponsive to their individual needs.
- **Power:** here the young teacher becomes absorbed into the school. The objective is to get them to conform to the traditions and practices. It is closest to an apprenticeship model and mirrors the unequal distribution of power within schools. Here support was seen to be weak.
- **Personal:** this was seen as the most effective model as it combined elements from the procedural model

with a professional working partnership.

This placing of personal relationship at the centre was also present in Fairbanks et al (2000) which starts with a detailed description of the relationship Jessica has with her mentor Mary: Jessica is both a “student [of]” and a “colleague” engaged in “mutual learning”, as well as having a “supportive friendly relationship”. All of these aspects are incompatible with a “procedural” or “power” based relationship. Their study of mentoring leads Fairbanks et al. to argue

“...mentoring consists of complex social interactions that mentor teachers and student teachers construct and negotiate for a variety of professional purposes and in response to the contextual factors they encounter.”

(Fairbanks et al 2000. 103)

	Beginning teaching	Supervised teaching	From teaching to learning	Reflective teaching
Stage of trainee development	Survival	Recognizing difficulties	Hitting the plateau	Moving on
Focus of student learning	Rules, rituals, routines and establishing authority	Teaching competences	Understanding pupil learning and developing effective teaching	Taking control and developing professionalism
Role of mentor and tutor	Providing models of effective practice	As trainers, providing focused advice and instruction	As critical friends, providing constructive critique for development	As co-enquirers, joining together in aspects of professional development
Key mentoring strategies	Student observation focused on class routines and teacher techniques	Focused observation by trainee, combined with structured observation of the trainee and feedback	Focused observation by, and structured observation of, the trainee Re-examination of lesson planning	Partnership in teaching and supervision

Mentors also need to be flexible over the length of the course, activities that are appropriate to a student at the start of the course might be irrelevant, or even counter productive

The other big factor impacting upon mentor practice is the institutional expectations, PGCE courses and schools function as a partnership, so the university has the responsibility for training the mentors and defining their roles. On the course we studied new mentors have nine hours of training spread over three twilight sessions, and have another twelve hours of training and meetings each year they have students. This means the role of mentor "...is defined by the H.E.I both formally in the documentation and training, and informally through the everyday working of the partnership." (Glover & Mardle 1995. 68)

The **Mentor Information Pack** (University of Birmingham undated) spells out the roles of the mentor on the course and lists student minimum entitlements as well as breaking down the skills needed by mentoring. It is done using a mixture of "To do" lists, case studies and timelines. This is done to guarantee some consistency of the mentoring experience by removing the uncertainty and ambiguity about mentoring. It is also based on the knowledge that some mentors will always do more than is officially needed, whilst others find it hard to fit mentoring in around their already busy professional lives so students have a guaranteed minimum.

Method of Study

The research was aimed to reveal weaknesses in the mentoring system; it was designed to show up any gaps between the theory, as outlined by the university and practice of mentoring in schools. As it was the students' experience of mentoring we wished to study here a sample of students were asked about being mentored on their first school

towards the end of the course. Pollard **Reflective Teaching** (2005. 36) has a diagram that shows how the focus and strategies of mentoring will need to change over time. placement. Forty student teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire, from three subjects, 11 from History, 7 from Physics and 22 from Religion Education.

The selection was a "convenience sample" based on practical considerations, we had access to the History students and we were working with the Physics and RE tutors who had their students in the University on the same day in March.

Data Collection

In order to obtain responses to the research questions, a mixed method approach was adopted, using a questionnaire to elicit both numerical data about the frequency of specific mentoring activities alongside open ended questions that encouraged student teachers to express their own experiences and expectations of their mentors. This may not be a classic mixed-method approach, in that we used only one research tool, however, it does fit the single study model set out in Cresswell and Clark *Designing and Conducting Mixed Method Research* (2007. 8) in that it generated both quantitative and qualitative data. It agrees more with Gorard and Taylor *Combining Methods in Educational and Social Research* (2004) who argue that the generation of quantitative and qualitative data should not be seen as separate paradigms.

The questions were derived from the set of common themes of mentor roles outlined in the course documentation of the PGCE course at University of Birmingham, School of Education. These questions were designed to collect information about the performance of mentor roles in schools as perceived by the student teachers.

Questionnaires to student teachers of History were sent through email and filled in questionnaires from respondents were collected through email. There were two follow up emails reminding students to reply. While questionnaires to student teachers of Physics and Religious Education were distributed in person and filled in questionnaires were gathered from respondents. The anonymity and identity of respondents was assured asking them not writing their names on questionnaires.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data centred/focused on key aspects: mentor roles and mentor attributes which influence on their relationship with the student teacher. In closed questions four responses (1) yes (2) to some extent (3) uncertain (4) no were given in each question which explain a role and responsibility of mentor and student teacher was asked to select one of the response which she feel more appropriate with regard to role and responsibility of mentor. To analyse the data a frequency count was made of each response. A higher frequency was considered to be an indication that the activity was more reliably carried out or occurred more regularly. A comparison of the frequencies of responses by gender was made. No significant differences were there. A comparison was also made between the responses of the Physics students as against the History and Religious Education students; there were some differences here that will be outlined later. Where, 50% or more of the responses showed the mentoring activity was carried out. We did not interpret this as a cause of concern, however where less than 50% said it was carried out this was seen as a cause of concern.

In open ended questions respondents were enabled to reveal their own discourses on becoming a teacher and how they were supported. This was used not only to triangulate

the numerical data, but also to enrich the accounts of being mentored. It will also be used in our later research into mentor and student discourses on mentoring.

There is insufficient time and space to go through all the results however the data clearly indicated areas of strength as well as activities less diligently carried out.

The results of the study revealed that the students felt mentor roles were carried out effectively in many areas, this coincides with the course Quality Assurance surveys. A number of areas came out as particular strengths;

- The data revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that mentors had a strong knowledge and understanding about the PGCE course, and the content of the school subjects.
- They were agreed that mentors helped to identify their strengths and weaknesses during their school placements, though females tended to feel this was done less than males.
- Mentors also discussed planning and teaching with the students and gave regular feedback on lessons and their progress. This is supposed to be done on a weekly basis according to the Partnership Agreement. The students also jointly planned lessons with mentors.
- Weekly meetings were held to discuss the student's progress and set targets for the week. Respondents agreed that mentors informed them of their progress
- The data reflected that mentors discussed timetables and consequently the timetable was appropriate to the student needs.
- Students had been shown around the school and department and students had been prior informed about essential contact details for the school in case they

- were ill, snowed in or the school was closed, etc.
- Mentors were accessible, and willing to discuss student's problems and give advice. This is interesting as this is one of the worries most commonly expressed in our survey of trainee mentors.
- Students do get the opportunity to become involved in the 'corporate life of the school' and extra-curricular activities.

The data revealed a number of areas that were less reliably carried out, these are potentially the areas that are poorly carried out;

- The needs of students at the start of the school placement were not really identified, though this practice seems to have been more reliably carried out in Physics rather than History or RE. However, as this was their first school placement the range of needs would be limited, most students are fixated with survival and looking like a teacher.
- Mentors did not explain school structures and policies, again History and RE students seemed less satisfied here, as compared to Physics.
- Some students felt that mentors did not help them to evaluate their teaching; however this seemed to an irregular practice rather than one that did not happen. This is a joint practice and supports Edwards & D'Arcy's (2004) argument that some mentors emphasise performance over reflection.
- A majority of students felt that they had not been welcomed to the school on arrival and that they had not been introduced to the key staff of the school.
- Professional expectations were not overtly discussed by most mentors with students.
- Students felt the mentors did not support those collecting data for their assignments.

- Students felt they did not have the opportunity to observe different subjects, teaching styles and situations. Again the scientists felt they had more experience here than the H&RE.

Limitations

There are a number of reservations about the data. The first is that the sample size was small and is not representative of the whole PGCE cohort. The other is that where students are clearly not getting their entitlement it does not suggest they are dissatisfied. Internal Q.A. data showed that students on history PGCE overwhelmingly satisfied with their experience of mentors and their support. Suggesting that the procedural model is supported by the personal attributes of the mentors, anecdotally students tend to praise mentors for being 'friendly', 'chatty' or in extreme cases 'he is the loveliest person in the world' or "I love her and want to spend the rest of my life with her' rather than holding meetings on time. Some areas might be misinterpreted by us, for instance the failure to discuss professional expectations may be a sign of success. From our experience of school based mentoring, the need to discuss professionalism with students only occurs when they were being unprofessional; if the students are already exemplary there is no need to discuss these issues. Finally some of the areas they felt had not been covered are more relevant to later stages in their development.

Conclusions

As mentors are expected to carry out specified roles, there are a number of implications for the PGCE course. Where students felt they were not fully conversant with the policies and expectations of their schools, the importance of the first week on school placements as the time to make the students feel welcomed, settle in and introduce them to key members of staff needs to be emphasised. There also needs to be observations of other

teachers in the school placement programme to show the variety of teaching styles and situations. Highlighting these issues needs to be done through the regular mentor meetings.

There is need of further research into the effectiveness of the mentoring practices. If we only research into the frequency of mentoring practices we may miss the quality of the personal dimension in the mentoring relationship.

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