

Case Study on Mentoring in Initial Teacher Education - Scotland

1 Setting within the teacher education system/organisation

1.1 Setting

This case study relates to the initial teacher education of student teachers undertaking a four year undergraduate degree programme: the Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree in the Faculty of education of the University of Glasgow. The Faculty draws upon a tradition of denominational teacher education dating back more than 100 years and the purpose of the BEd course is to produce suitably qualified and motivated teachers for the Catholic primary school sector throughout Scotland. BEd students undertake a mixture of academically and pedagogically focussed course within the Faculty but also have a range of school experience placements of varying duration and focus across each of their four years of study. The mentoring activity which forms the basis of this case study relates to the formal relationship which exists between the Faculty tutor (the Mentor) who visits, supports and assesses the student teacher (the Mentee) whilst out in school on placement. Mentoring activities take place both in Faculty and in School. However, there are issues arising in this case which raise the fundamental question as to whether this is truly mentoring, or merely mentor like activity.

1.2 Basic Features

Since the introduction of a revised BEd degree structure in 2002 the role of Faculty tutors has been strengthened and expanded to embrace not only contact with the students whilst they are out in schools on school experience but also to contact back in Faculty. The new version of the degree now involves tutors acting as mentors as part of the formalised Faculty-based programme of preparation for school experience. Previously, tutors who undertook school experience visits had very little planned contact with the students they were tasked with visiting and assessing. Tutors for school experience were drawn from a pool of subject specialists and educational theorists who undertook school visits as required as part of their overall workload. Often, tutors visited students whom they had previously never met.

Under the arrangements for the new degree, each of the four year groups of approximately 140 per intake, have an identified group of staff drawn from across the Faculty who will act as school experience tutors for a particular year of the course. These Faculty are divided into two groups: six **Lead** tutors who meet with their identified tutor groups comprising around 24 students on a weekly basis for 2 hours, and a further 12 **Associate** tutors who, as pairs, work to an identified lead tutor. Collectively, this large group is known as the **Integrated Team**. Associate tutors collaborate with their lead tutor across the year on a number of agreed dates where each tutor group of 24 students is sub-divided into 3 groups of 8. Each lead and associate tutor has their own group of 8 particular students whom they will mentor for that year. The mentoring therefore takes place within the context of school experience and the Faculty-based **Integrated Programme** which occurs both before and after the placements.

1.3 Personal Relationship to the Mentoring Process

Within the Faculty my main role is Head of ICT within the department of Curriculum Studies. In common with the other Curricular Heads (Mathematics, Language & Literature, Expressive Arts, and Environmental Studies) the route to this post has entailed a substantial number of years engaged in teaching, curriculum development and management. Despite having a management position, curricular Heads do not act as Lead tutors. This role tends to be filled by experienced non-promoted staff who have more time to devote to the work required. As an Associate tutor, I have my own sub-group of 8 second year BEd students whom I visit and assess on school placement. As a more experienced member of the team I am expected to feed insights and experiences into the regular meetings of the Integrated Team which also includes junior staff and staff only recently appointed to the Faculty who are still learning and adapting to their tutoring role.

2 Roles and tasks of a mentor

2.1 Recruitment and selection procedures

The members of the Integrated Team who act as mentors/tutors are drawn mainly, but not exclusively from full-time Faculty academic staff who should be GTC registered. A recent development is to employ other individuals from outwith the Faculty solely for the purposes of school visiting and participation in the Integrated Teams. These tend to be recently retired senior staff from primary schools who have worked closely with the Faculty in their previous roles and who come highly recommended. These external Associate tutors are bought-in on short term contracts to mentor a specific number of students across different year groups and teams. As with Faculty staff involved in this role, external mentor / tutors are responsible to the Course Leader for BEd School Experience.

2.2 Benefit and pay-off to the mentors

An emerging issue of concern and debate relates to the extent to which the policy of employing such external people should be continued and extended. While they bring direct recent and relevant experience of primary teaching (something that many Faculty staff cannot claim to have) there is a concern that they are doing it only for financial gain and do not invest their expertise and energies into other areas of the work of the Faculty. The concern is that a move towards placing mentoring / tutoring too much in the hands of external bought-in staff breaks with the valued tradition of mentor/tutors being Faculty staff with whom students will have had prior contact in a variety of professional and informal contexts.

Faculty staff who undertake the mentoring /tutoring role do so as part of the balance of their professional academic duties and receive no specific payment for this work. However, since the merger into the University and the enlargement of the Faculty with academics who have no background, training or qualification in teaching, a further concern is emerging due to such individuals being utilised to mentor and assess student teachers on school experience. This is contrary to the stipulation that staff engaged in this kind of work through TEI's should be GTC registered.

2.3 Types of mentoring activities

The main phases of mentoring occur during the integrated programme, the school experience visits, and the eventual group and individual debriefing that follows.

The integrated programme follows a calendar of activities which has been created under the guidance of the course leader. This includes lectures, seminars and workshops where lead and associate students work on preparing their students (mentees) for school experience. These cover theoretical and 'craft' issues as well as administrative and assessment issues.

When mentor/tutors go out to visit their students in school they have a range of tasks and issues to address. An important part of the visit involves observation of the student teaching and interacting with pupils. Each student will receive 2 visits in the span of a standard 5-6 week placement. In Scotland, competence is measured by a set of Benchmark standards against which the student is assessed. The process of observation is guided by the benchmark requirements and a mentor/tutor must provide students with written feedback and critique on every visit. This is formalised by way of a standardised Interim comment sheet produced on carbonless NCR paper which focuses on the 3 main benchmark areas, each with a subset of individual benchmark headings. Apart from general observational comments, areas of strength and weakness are identified, noted and expanded upon. At the end of each visit, the mentor/tutor meets with the student for a professional debriefing/discussion and identification of issues and next steps. Both mentor and mentee sign the form and each retains a copy. School experience is assessed in this manner but actual grades are not awarded at this time. That comes later.

In addition to speaking to the student, the mentor/tutor also discusses a wide range of professional and developmental issues with the host class teacher and the Head teacher. This is seen as important in order to get a more informed, holistic view and avoid making erroneous snap-shot judgements based on observation of a single visit.

Grading of performance occurs some time after the end of school experience once the mentor tutor has had time to reflect on the outcomes of both visits and the evidence of professional commitment and growth shown by the pupils in relation to performance. Also taken into account is the quality of the assessed portfolio submission that each student has to make on completing their placement. Students are graded A-D for Pass and E-F for fails. Two grades are awarded for aspects of each of the 3 main benchmark areas: Professional knowledge & understanding, Professional skills & abilities, Professional values & personal commitment.

Students who fail in any or all of the 6 grades awarded automatically get the chance of a further retrieval placement in which they generally overtake their deficit. Normally grades for successful retrieval are restricted to D and this has an effect ultimately on the overall classification of degree awarded as the grades from year 2 onwards conflate into an award-linked pointage system.

3 Roles and tasks of the mentee

3.1 Introducing the mentee

Since the move to the new degree structure, mentees are inducted much more systematically and effectively via the integrated programme and opportunities to engage with their mentor. Prior to school experience, all students complete *a Personal & Professional Development Plan* in which they identify and express the issues they will seek to cover and areas to be developed on placement. This forms the basis for professional and personal discussion with the mentor before, during and after the placement. This PPDP is also shared with the host teacher.

Each period of school experience has a focus in terms of stage of pupils taught and also expectation and direction. To this end, the students are provided with a highly detailed *Remit* document which specifies the tasks and approaches they must undertake, and by what stage in the span of the placement. It also specifies the range of assessment tasks to be undertaken and documented in the assessable portfolio to be submitted. The mentors and the school staff also receive this documentation.

3.2 What kind of results are expected from the perspective of the mentee?

In this specific case of mentoring, the main outcome from the mentee's point of view is to achieve not only a pass for school experience, but also good grades which will feed into the overall classification of their degree award. In addition, they also expect to receive a very clear and strong steer from their mentor with respect to developing their practice as teachers but this tends to be subsidiary to achieving good grades

The allying of mentoring to graded assessment does tend to skew the mentor/mentee relationship and move the mentoring process into less productive territory. The issue of assessment is difficult to ignore and raises the question of the extent to which the mentee is paying lip-service to the formative comments of the mentor in the hope of achieving good grades. This means that, however professionally valid or well intentioned this case of mentoring is intended to be, it can never be fully perceived as neutral or non-threatening.

A feature of being a student today, increasing, is the tendency to resort to litigation over any issue which the student feels, rightly or wrongly, that procedures have not been followed fully or that they in some other way have been disadvantaged. This is very significant in respect to this case study as, with the production of ever-more elaborate remit documentation set alongside increasingly more wide-ranging assessment demands, student mentees are not slow to scrutinise and criticise. This inevitably leads to an increase in formal appeals thus generating workload strain and personal stress for Faculty staff.

If an institution is determined to pursue mentoring allied to assessment then it has to recognise the absolute need to have documentation that is crisp and unambiguous and that all parties, mentor, mentee, school partners are fully conversant with it and that procedures are clear and followed assiduously. While this does not overcome the negative effect of associating mentoring with assessment, it may go some way to ameliorating the growing trend to litigate which is ultimately destructive to supporting emerging professionalism.

3.3 What are tasks of the mentee to gain profit from the mentoring relationship?

Mentoring, as described in this case, is problematic for the reasons outlined above. Those mentees who benefit most are those who themselves are already confident reflective learners who can see beyond the assessment issue and recognise the opportunity for professional growth. However, to achieve this, their mentor must also possess a similarly open-minded approach and not be fixated on the assessment imperative and the procedural / mechanical considerations.

It is interesting to compare the rhetoric of this approach to mentoring which purports to be coming from the perspective of Critical Constructivism but which, in reality is trapped in the more mechanistic Apprenticeship mode.

4 Supporting structures in the professional context

4.1 In-service support for mentors?

Mentors who join an integrated team as core or associate tutors are given some preparation and support but this tends to focus on the detail of assessment and procedures. This extends to shadowing other more experienced tutors carrying out visits in schools. However, it is not aimed explicitly in the direction of how to become an effective mentor. As a result, few tutors if any would recognise that they are in mentoring territory or would conceive of themselves as mentors or their students as mentees.

4.2 Is the learning partnership embedded in a system of development and research?

This case is located in a cycle of renewal and development which has been driven by the need to have the BEd course revalidated and accredited every 5 years. However, until the Faculty recognise and make more explicit the mentoring nature of the partnership it will fail to develop fully.

4.3 Does a policy exist to the quality of mentoring?

The short answer to this is no. The standards and benchmarks referred to earlier are in relation to initial teacher education rather than to mentoring.

4.4 Are mentors responsible to a teacher education institution?

The staff are all responsible to the TEI but there currently exist some fragmentation and lack of clarity in management of lines of responsibility. The mentors are drawn mainly from across the 3 departments who participate in initial teacher education. However, despite the fact that the Heads of those departments are senior academic managers, the course leader, who is in a more junior level, does not answer to them but to a Faculty committee. This leads to ambiguity and internal misunderstandings and tensions.

If the underlying conception of how to create the next generation of well-rounded reflective teacher practitioners is allowed to be too heavily driven by assessment and benchmark statements, this does not lend itself to worthwhile mentoring nor is it likely to move the development as tutors in the direction of becoming more mentor-like.