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**Better together: Enhancing professional learning
about mentoring through research and
collaboration**

Better together: Enhancing professional learning about mentoring through research and collaboration

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Abstract

In this research working paper, we report on one strand of our research project, Mentoring in Primary ITE, which aimed to identify, enhance and disseminate effective mentoring practice. Our focus here is on mentors' professional learning, and how this has shaped our current mentor training. We share data that enabled us to address one of our research questions, 'What helps mentors to develop their expertise?', together with our reflections on the value of working collaboratively in participatory research to enhance practice.

Our partnership approach is aligned with 'educative mentoring' (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), and is premised on a vision of classrooms as complex sites of enquiry, where student teachers, mentors and academics co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning. Our close-to-practice research, which began in 2023, has involved asking mentors about their professional learning, as well as involving mentors in the research process, through enquiry into their own and others' practice. We share three strands of our collaborative work, which have enhanced our own professional learning, and have impacted upon our partnership policy and practice.

First, inspired by Stanulis *et al.*'s (2019) mentor study groups, we reflect on how working with mentors in special interest groups has supported powerful professional learning for school-based mentors and university-based lecturers. Second, we share what we have learned about the development of mentor expertise through our analysis of questionnaire and interview data. Third, we reflect on the value of co-analysing interview transcripts with our mentors. These three strands have supported our own learning and enabled us to produce a research-informed mentor toolkit to support mentors' professional learning, which has become embedded as a strong element of our partnership practice.

Introduction

We are a group of colleagues who work (or have previously worked) in primary ITE at the University of Birmingham. Our approach is aligned with 'educative mentoring' (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and is premised on a vision of classrooms as complex sites of enquiry, where student teachers, mentors and lecturers co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning. We work closely with our partnership mentors and recognise that effective mentoring and coaching makes a difference for our student teachers. Our research project, Mentoring in Primary ITE, has used participatory research to help us to identify and enhance effective mentoring in our partnership. We report here on one strand of our research that focuses on mentors' professional learning, to help us address the research question, 'What helps mentors to develop their expertise?'

Mentors' professional learning

Within existing research, mentors have been cited by mentees as the most important influence on their learning (Clarke, Triggs and Neilson, 2014). The benefits to the mentee can be significant, as they learn from a more experienced colleague's knowledge, expertise, feedback, guidance, support and encouragement. The experience of mentoring can also support mentors' own professional learning (Hobson *et al.* 2009; Trevethan and Sandretto, 2017). Lofthouse (2022, n.d.) summarises that 'At the heart of good mentoring is a sustained and sustaining conversation between two people.' However, the effectiveness of such conversations and of mentoring skills is considered to vary widely (Hobson *et al.* 2009).

Lofthouse (2022, n.d.) recently emphasised the complexities of mentoring, noting that it is a dynamic and multi-faceted practice. However, as Schwille (2008, p.165) states, 'Good teachers do not automatically become good mentors mentoring practice must be learned'. Stanulis *et al.* (2019, p.567) suggested that mentoring student teachers involved more than cooperation, and that mentors needed to adopt the role of teacher educators, focussing on the why and how of teaching, as:

'there is more to mentoring than being an emotional cheerleader ... many classroom teachers ... are left to figure out how to mentor a student teacher on their own. Very often, they lack the preparation that enables them to provide high-quality support for their student teachers ... Much like teaching, mentoring is a complex practice to be learned, and merely having teaching experience does not mean a teacher is prepared to effectively mentor.'

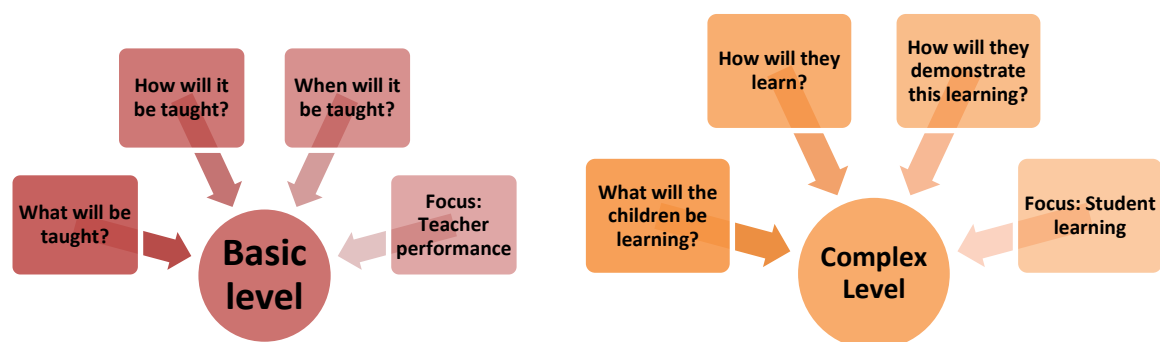
Mentor preparation is often limited and there is sparse research on how mentoring is learned (Hobson *et al.* 2009), with recommendations to date including developing focussed conceptualisations of mentoring and providing illustrative examples of effective mentoring (Schwille, 2008; Carver and Feiman-Nemser, 2009; Wexler, 2020). Our wider research embraces the challenge set by Stanulis *et al.* (2019, p.578) that: 'Further research is needed to investigate how specific models of professional development can prepare teachers to enact mentoring practices in educative ways.'

Well-designed mentor preparation can provide opportunities for mentors to develop their repertoire, skills, expertise, and potentially enhance their careers. However, it needs to be acknowledged that despite the potential benefits of mentoring, it is a demanding role and one that is not wanted by all teachers (Lofthouse, 2022). The importance of bringing mentors together to reflect on their experiences has been highlighted by Marciano *et al.* (2019) as a way for mentors to continue to grow professionally. This form of peer reflection and development is seen in Stanulis *et al.* (2019), who offer a model for professional development through mentor study groups – a concept supported by Wexler (2019). These involved selecting a practice, creating an opportunity for mentors to discuss and investigate their use of the practice, and then reflecting on the enactment of the practice and the impact on student teachers’ learning. Inspired by Stanulis *et al.*’s (2019) mentor study groups, in our partnership, we established special interest groups to explore specific aspects of mentoring.

Special interest groups

In 2022, we invited mentors to join a range of special interest groups on aspects of mentoring practice, each led by a lecturer and valuing co-construction with mentors. In line with Stanulis *et al.* (2019), groups shared current practice, engaged with research evidence and chose aspects of practice to explore. Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle provided a useful foundation to explore mentors’ experience through reflection, moving towards ‘active experimentation’ and development of practice. Here, we share two examples of how special interest groups supported mentors’ professional learning, and continue to do so as part of current mentor training.

One of our special interest groups focused on **co-planning and co-teaching**, which our experience and reading indicated can contribute strongly to student teachers’ learning. While co-planning takes place prior to teaching, co-teaching is a mentoring practice ‘inside the action of teaching’ (Schwille, 2008, p.156), and both involve joint work, making thinking visible and purposefully shaping learning. Research draws attention to student teachers’ limited understanding of the complexities of planning, which is largely invisible (Grossman, Hammerness and MacDonald, 2009). Co-planning has been identified as an essential mentoring practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), which involves planning ‘with’ student teachers, with a focus on the ‘what,’ ‘when,’ ‘why’ and ‘how’ of planning decisions (Stanulis *et al.*, 2019). Using this literature, two levels of co-planning were explored, as seen in the figure below:



Mentors also considered the three-lesson model, known as a 'teaming model' (van Velzen, Volman and Brekelmans, 2019), which involves co-planning, co-teaching and evaluation of lessons (van Velzen *et al.*, 2012). The mentors agreed to 'actively experiment' (Kolb, 1984) with the model, with the mentor teaching the first lesson, the mentor and student teacher co-teaching the second lesson and the student teacher teaching the third lesson. Mentors reflected on their student teachers' learning and their own professional learning, recognising that the model and the complex level questions made the planning and teaching process more explicit and specific to trainees, particularly those who found planning challenging. Mentors also highlighted the importance of open communication and pre-agreed signals with the trainees when co-teaching, to ensure 'stepping in' to model a specific strategy is considered a professional learning step.

Another of our special interest groups explored **supporting student teachers to work with additional adults**. While university sessions develop knowledge about working effectively with additional adults in the classroom, we found that deploying adults effectively was often identified by mentors as an area for development. The special interest group enabled us to explore mentors' practice in supporting trainees to interpret and enact their knowledge in the classroom context. We were particularly aware of how important this area is for our trainees in special schools, who are often working with at least three other adults in the classroom and who can find it challenging to direct other, often more experienced, professionals.

Three of our special school mentors met with a university lecturer, reflecting on and sharing their current practice, as well as considering what research suggests is effective practice. Colleagues agreed to try out something new, for example encouraging a student teacher to 'shadow' a teaching assistant to develop an understanding of this role and how they received and responded to direction from the teacher. The group met twice again, discussing the efficacy of the approaches and the appropriateness of gradual fading of explicit support over time, balancing the sharing of knowledge with helping student teachers find out what works for them as they constructed their own professional identity (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Finally, one mentor and a lecturer wrote up the findings and advice from the meetings as a matrix for the year, under three themes: relationships, developing expectations of teaching assistants and developing understanding of the role of teaching assistants, as well as some overall 'top tips.'

The special interest groups appeared to help the mentors, who hosted trainees in their own classrooms, see themselves more as teacher educators, critical to trainees' development (Stanulis *et al.*, 2019). Engaging with research in this way has supported powerful professional learning for both school-based mentors and university-based lecturers, and the materials continue to inform mentoring practice.

Questionnaire and interview data about mentors' professional learning

As part of our wider project, in 2022 we conducted mixed methods research with mentors working in our partnership schools. Using questionnaires and interviews, we explored mentors' practices and their perceived effectiveness, which we have reported in Wilson *et al.* (2025). We also explored what helps mentors to develop their own expertise, which we report on and reflect on here. In total, 23 mentors completed a questionnaire, and eight mentors took part in semi-structured interviews. This empirical research explored the professional development opportunities and practices that mentors perceived to be the most effective in developing their mentoring practice, revealing key insights. These opportunities included 'designed measures,' such as university hosted mentor training, 'point of need measures', including lecturer support and 'personal' contexts, including general experience and personal experiences of being mentored. We asked mentors to rate the effectiveness of these opportunities using a Likert scale and collected qualitative data from an open question asking what further professional development would be useful.

Analysis of the questionnaire data revealed that mentors felt that they learned most from practices which involved collaborating with university lecturers. The three practices which were perceived to be the most effective were: engaging with regular emails from the university; conducting joint observations with university lecturers; and having discussions with university lecturers regarding trainee progress. This suggests that mentors valued the 'designed' and 'point of need' measures that have been provided to support them, and that rich professional learning resulted from collaboration from joint work beyond personal experience of being a mentor. These insights have informed, and continue to inform, our approach to designing mentor training, where we prioritise collaborative work.

Findings from thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews resonated with the questionnaire findings. Some of the most frequently discussed practices that supported mentors' professional learning involved support provided by the university. In particular, mentors referred to the importance of timely lecturer support when working with trainees in difficulty and in being abreast of course expectations. These observations suggest that mentors valued 'point of need' support from lecturers to collaborate with and support them through challenging situations, which could be viewed as a form of collaborative 'debriefing' (Schwille, 2008). Relationships between mentors and lecturers are key here, as exemplified by a mentor who commented, '[I can] always get support from the tutors at university. I know that if we need support, then I could contact them.' It is therefore crucial for university lecturers to invest in establishing strong relationships with school mentors early on to facilitate this important support.

Mentors also frequently discussed the value of specific mentor training provided by the university, which offered them opportunities to share experiences of mentoring with others. Similar methods have been attributed to the successful development of mentors (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). One mentor felt 'it was really helpful just to hear other people's experiences... how other schools go about mentoring.' Taken together, these observations highlight the potential for specific mentor training to not only provide clear guidance in this important skill set but also valuable spaces for co-construction of knowledge between lecturers and mentors (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

In the years since this data collection, we have strengthened our provision of such spaces, which we believe has further strengthened established professional relationships.

Finally, mentors highlighted a number of practices that would support their development further. These included further training opportunities to support struggling student teachers, training to develop coaching skills and receiving support and guidance from the university regarding the latest key research that underpins teaching. We value mentors' voices and have since addressed these development points in our updated training provision. We believe that the success of our current provision (see Wilson *et al*, forthcoming) is rooted in close collaboration and listening carefully to our mentors.

Involving mentors in data analysis

Having interviewed mentors about their practices and learning, and identified themes in relational to professional learning, we also collaborated with mentors to analyse effective mentoring practices. The first phase of analysis of interview transcripts was carried out in partnership with our school-based mentors. This part of the data analysis was carried out over Zoom, so that we could ensure that as many school-based mentors as possible were able to take part. It was important to us that mentors were involved in the data analysis so that the research was being carried out with them, rather than being 'done to' them (Lieberman, 1986). This approach also allowed us to address the criterion of 'credibility' in relation to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. By scrutinising and discussing the data with mentors, we were able to ensure that as lecturers, we were not imposing our own pre-determined conceptions of what effective mentoring 'looks like' onto the data.

To begin with, each data analyst looked at an interview transcript individually, highlighting key words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs that we thought were significant in relation to the research questions. We added comments to the text to capture our initial thoughts. The next task was to discuss each participant in pairs/small groups and compare what we had identified as important. As a result of this discussion, we wrote a short pen portrait of each participant to share with the wider group of lectures and mentors. We also listed key themes that had emerged from our analysis. These were the themes that had emerged strongly from one participant or that were shared by several participants.

In general, we found that lecturers and mentors highlighted similar key words and identified similar key themes. This data analysis was an important part of the research process, but it also afforded us with the opportunity for some rich discussion about what effective mentoring is and how important mentoring is in our roles as teacher educators. There is a strong emphasis in initial teacher education on the need for student teachers to take a reflective approach to their development. The data analysis process carved out a space for us as teacher educators to reflect with mentors on our role in supporting these student teachers. As Grimmet *et al*. (2018) point out, dialogic spaces such as that created by our data analysis meeting are important if we are to build partnerships with schools and develop meaningful learning opportunities for student teachers.

Conclusion and recent developments

In our partnership and in our research, we value the bringing together of knowledge and experience in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), whereby mentors and lecturers both contribute to the knowledge base of our community. Through our participatory research, including special interest groups and joint analysis of mentor interviews, we have created opportunities for joint enquiry and professional learning. Just as educative mentoring positions mentors and mentees as co-learners and sees teaching as a process of enquiry (Langdon and Ward, 2015; see also Lofthouse *et al.*, 2020), our approach positions university-based lecturers and school-based mentors as co-learners and sees mentoring as a process of enquiry.

The current national context places heavy time demands on mentors, as expert teachers. We value mentor expertise but believe that mentoring, like all forms of teaching, is a process of professional enquiry and learning that is enhanced through collaboration. Following our research, to maximise opportunities to share our professional learning, we co-constructed a research-informed mentor toolkit for our wider community of mentors. Our learning about effective mentoring has therefore been shared and has influenced practice beyond the mentors who participated in our research.

Since the initial research was undertaken, the mentoring landscape in initial teacher education has experienced considerable change. The political climate regarding mentoring had an enormous impact on ITE providers with an announcement by the DfE (2023) that, in response to the ITT Market Review in the 2024-25 academic year, schools that offered ITE placements needed their mentors to complete 20 hours of initial mentor training with an accredited training provider, and funding would be given for the completed hours. The intention was to improve the quality of mentoring and meant that ITE providers, in addition to providing the training, took on a quality assurance role. This increased the expectations on providers, schools and mentors, and had logistical, financial and time implications. It resulted in many ITE providers losing placement schools due to the amount of time mentors had to dedicate to the training (UCET, 2024). In November 2024 the DfE announced that the 20 hours would no longer be a requirement, yet funding was still in place for those that had completed it or chose to do so. The current requirements for 2025-26 (DfE, 2025) state that providers must ensure that specific requirements for mentoring are met, once again placing an emphasis on providers to deliver high-quality mentor training and resources, in addition to the quality assurance of mentoring.

Our findings about mentors' professional learning that we have shared here proved to be invaluable as we navigated this changing mentoring landscape. Our response to the requirements built heavily on what we had learnt from working with, and researching with, our mentors over several years. As a provider we adapted our mentor training, weaving in materials we had read and co-produced about effective mentoring practice. The mentor toolkit forms part of our training and ongoing support for mentoring. We also used our learning about how new and experienced mentors develop their expertise to inform our design of initial and refresher mentor training. In both cases, we made an intentional decision to prioritise collaborative learning and networking, reflecting our belief that learning is 'better together' (see also Wilson *et al.*, forthcoming).

Those of us currently in the primary ITE team continue to research effective mentoring. Having reported on the

perceptions held by mentors and student teachers about effective mentoring practice (Wilson *et al*, 2025), we have shifted our focus to the mentoring relationship and have since interviewed pairs of mentors and mentees about how value is created. This research is still ongoing, with the pilot study offering valuable insights into what effective mentoring looks like from the perspective of mentor and mentee. We remain committed to providing further opportunities for our mentors to engage with us in close-to-practice research, which we believe affords rich potential for professional learning and increases the agency of those in our partnership.

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