PGCE Practice Tutors – preconceptions, perceptions and actuality

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Abstract

This study explores how those who have taken on the role of a practice tutor within the PGCE in Wales see and action their role. Five practice tutors are interviewed and the characteristics and experiences that they bring to the role are outlined. It is clear that these professionals understand the complex role of a mentor and bring their understanding, experience and enthusiasm to the role. They increase our understanding of what it means to take on a role that bridges a potential divide between school practice and university knowledge and how to support professionals taking on that role.

1. Introduction

The project was designed to provide information about the range of characteristics of Practice Tutors. Practice Tutors are key in the new Open University (OU) PGCE in Wales programme which offers successful students a PGCE with QTS (qualified teacher status). The programme was developed in a partnership between the OU and the regional education consortia and schools in Wales, at a time of great change across the sector. The planned Welsh education reforms span the curriculum across compulsory education as well as the professional standards for teaching and leadership. They include the requirement for statutory induction and expectation that teachers sustain highly effective practice. As such the reforms intend to provide a focus for career-long professional learning for teachers.

Practice Tutors have a particular leading role within the structure of the new programme. The PGCE in Wales is a two-year blended learning programme. It integrates face-to-face school-based experience, in a student's local area and university tuition and assessment using a virtual learning environment. Part of the Practice Tutor role is to offer a link between the university and thus the theory and research integrated throughout the PGCE teaching and learning materials, the regional consortia and school partners in Wales who provide the practice learning element of the programme. Figure 1 outlines the stakeholders in the education system who are part of the whole picture in which the practice tutors work and the vision of the school as a learning organisation which has been crucial in the conception of the PGCE in Wales.

Practice Tutors are experienced classroom practitioners and school-based teacher educators. A core aspect of the Practice Tutors' contribution is to create a supportive mentoring relationship with mentors who are the teachers within schools working with the PGCE students day-to-day. The Practice Tutor meets and interacts with the student several times over the two years of the student's PGCE but their relationship is primarily with the mentor. This enables the co-construction of knowledge about teaching and how it links with theory (see Figure 2). However, at the same time the Practice Tutor takes on a quality assurance role ensuring that the standards against which teachers are assessed are understood and consistently applied. It is, therefore, a complex role

requiring the Practice Tutor to be a supporter and a judge, to be confident of their own understanding of the Welsh standards for teaching (Welsh Government 2019) and how they may be
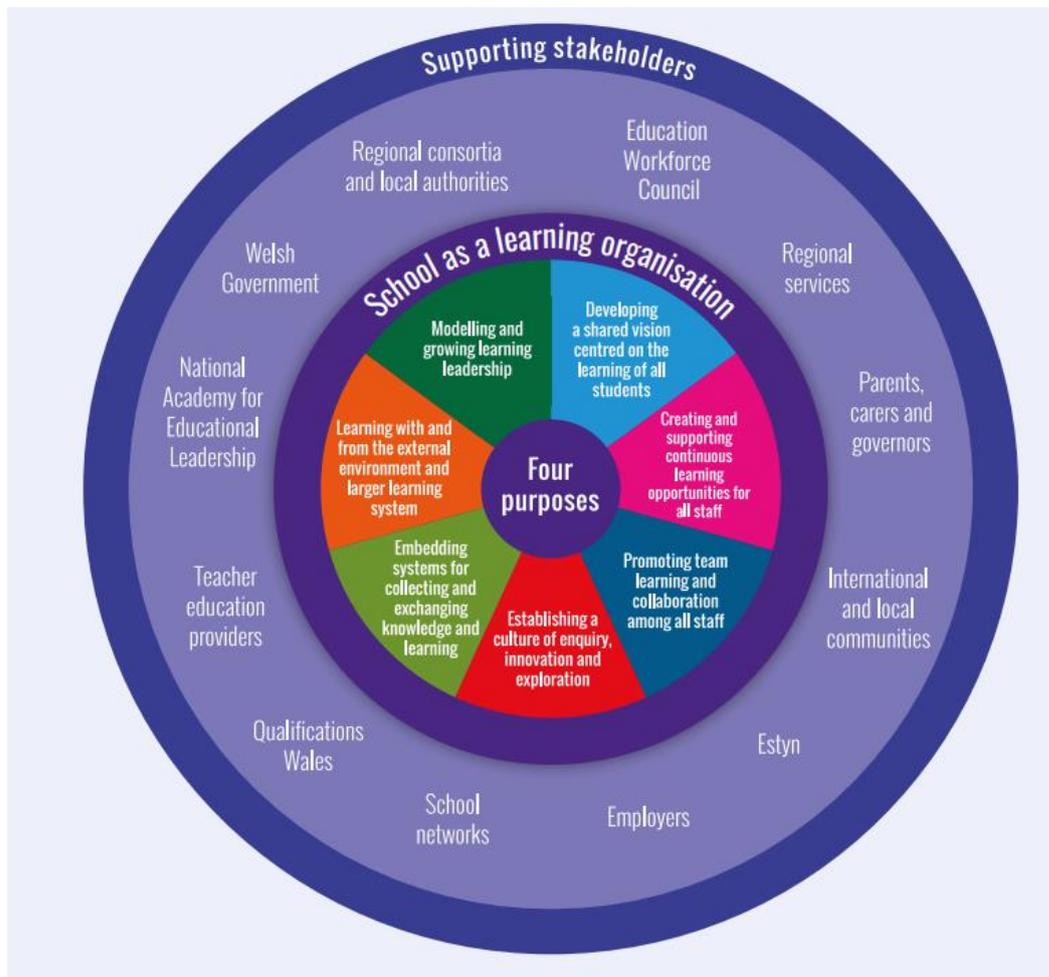

Figure 1 Stakeholders in the school as a learning organisation (OECD, 2019)
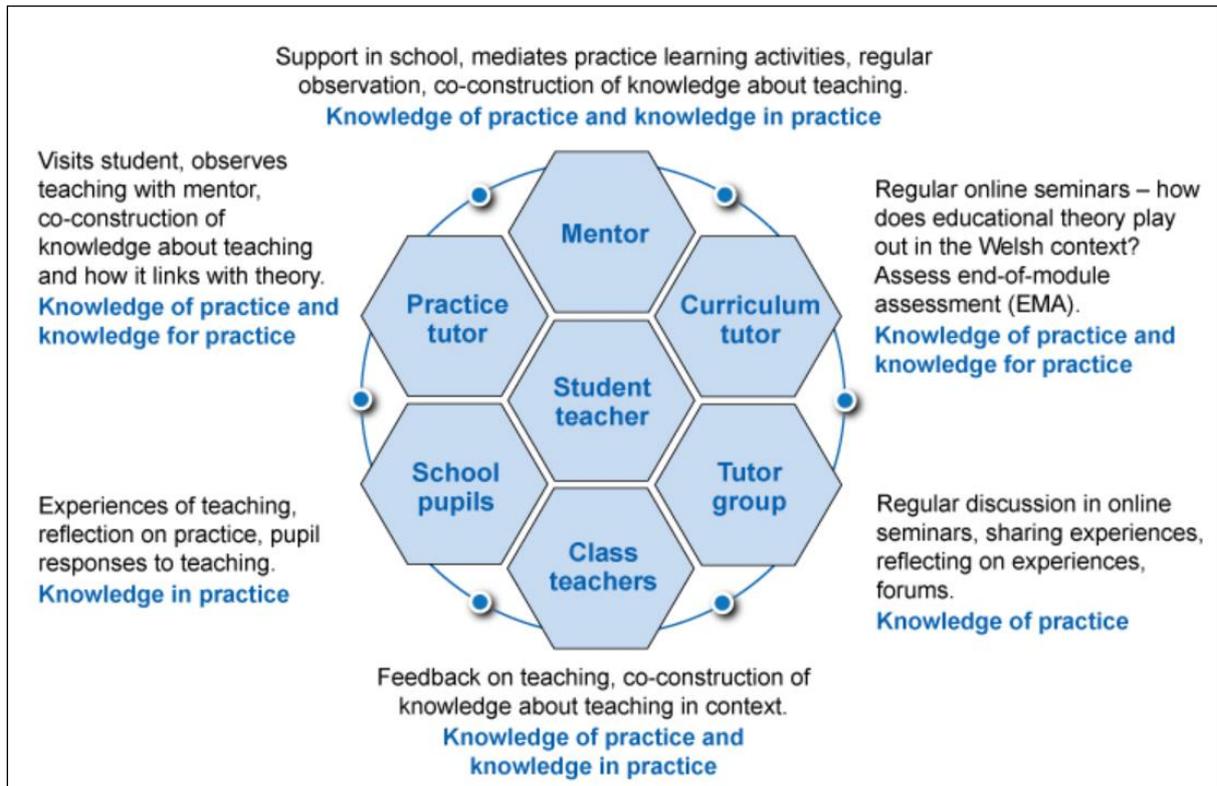
applied in professional practice.

The professionals who undertake such a complex role bring much experience and expertise to the partnership but are likely themselves to require support. Therefore, this project aims to better understand the expertise and situation of Practice Tutors so that the partnership can draw on them as the programme evolves. Furthermore, understanding Practice Tutors' aspirations and priorities will inform the design of support for the further development of these tutors appropriate to their particular contexts. Understanding more about the people appointed to this post will also allow the wider team to know how and where to support them in extending their professional knowledge.

A further complexity of the structure of the PGCE is that Practice Tutors were not appointed by the OU, but by a combination of partnership schools and Regional Consortia in Wales. Thus, the Practice Tutors are embedded in a network of schools with whom their schools normally and naturally collaborate. Therefore, the PGCE partnership is building a community which overlaps and interacts with existing networks. The community support students in becoming teachers locally, regionally and nationally. To do this effectively professional relationships must be developed including all those who support PGCE students and relationships are best built on understanding. This project is a first

step to understanding more about the Practice Tutor who is a key cog in the OU PGCE in Wales model (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Roles of PGCE (Wales) partnership members

Support in school, mediates practice learning activities, regular observation, co-construction of knowledge about teaching.
Knowledge of practice and knowledge in practice

Visits student, observes teaching with mentor, co-construction of knowledge about teaching and how it links with theory.
Knowledge of practice and knowledge for practice

Regular online seminars – how does educational theory play out in the Welsh context? Assess end-of-module assessment (EMA).
Knowledge of practice and knowledge for practice

Experiences of teaching, reflection on practice, pupil responses to teaching.
Knowledge in practice

Regular discussion in online seminars, sharing experiences, reflecting on experiences, forums.
Knowledge of practice

Feedback on teaching, co-construction of knowledge about teaching in context.
Knowledge of practice and knowledge in practice

Mentor

Practice tutor

Curriculum tutor

Student teacher

School pupils

Tutor group

Class teachers

2. Literature

The outline for the Practice Tutor's role was developed following guidance from Estyn (2018) which was in turn founded on research-based literature on best practice in educating and supporting student teachers. In this section we will review the literature which formed the view of the role that the Practice tutor should take in order to enable comparison between the expectations and the actuality and consider the likely professional development needs of Practice Tutors.

The OU PGCE in Wales was set up in response to the Welsh Government's reaction to Furlong's (2015) remark that "Initial teacher education in Wales needs to change" (p.5). Tabberer (2013) also felt that change to improve the quality of initial teacher education and to improve the number of teachers with the best qualifications was required. Donaldson (2015) and OECD (2019) further supported reform of initial teacher education. The need to improve the diversity of the teaching profession was one of the driving forces behind the design of the PGCE (Wales) blended learning model. The distance learning and part-time elements of tuition and assessment remove some barriers to participation (for example rural location, caring responsibilities, the need to keep earning). The aspiration is that the programme will support more students from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups to attain QTS. As students study and complete school experience in their local area, the distributed nature of the students in the PGCE Wales cohorts required Practice Tutors to be appointed by schools and regional consortia throughout Wales.

The Welsh Government accepted Furlong's research and started to implement changes in the way that Initial Teacher Education was constituted (Welsh Government 2015). All existing providers were invited to restructure their provision and submit it for accreditation, some decided to no longer offer teacher education. Alongside these new structures being implemented in the provision for teacher education (Welsh Government 2019) a new school curriculum was also introduced (Donaldson 2015, Welsh Government 2017). The new curriculum asked teachers to think of education in a different way, teachers should aim to meet the Four Purposes of education, that is they should work so that learners become:

1. ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising;
2. creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work;
3. ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world;
4. healthy confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

The curriculum is organised in six 'areas of learning and experience' (expressive arts; health and wellbeing; humanities; languages, literacy and communication; numeracy and science and technology) (Welsh Government, nd). Teachers and schools have much greater freedom in the design of the curriculum and selection of material appropriate for their learners' needs than previously. Therefore, the curriculum itself places new and different responsibilities on all those who educate teachers in Wales.

The reports and government initiatives described above laid a clear onus on all involved in teacher education to be change makers in support of the new standards for teachers and the introduction of the new curriculum. The intricacies of the role of a Practice Tutor were set out in the light of the key role they would play in enabling the OU PGCE in Wales to be part of the changes. Their role was envisaged as a complex interplay between several roles:

- to assess the teaching practice of students on the PGCE in Wales;

- to verify (or otherwise) in-school decisions on whether or not a student meets the standards for teaching in Wales;
- to quality assure the practice-based outcomes of the qualification;
- to take a supportive stance towards the mentors in school, forming a mentoring partnership with the person supporting the student teacher in school;
- to promote and advise on the many ways in which the student can implement the new Curriculum for Wales;
- to share research-based advice and promote the use of research to improve practice, ensuring the link between theory and practice is clear and important in the training of the student;
- to advise the partnership of the mentors' professional development needs and, in some respects, to provide professional development.
- to be at the hub of nurturing existing partnerships, building new ones and networks to share practice within and between schools.

The first three of these bullets mean that the Practice Tutor is taking on the traditional role of a university tutor described by Edwards and Protheroe (2004) as 'arrive, observe, feedback and depart'. It is the last five bullets that make the role of the PGCE Wales Practice Tutor distinctive. They represent a key partnership response to the research literature on educating teachers of quality.

BERA-RSA (2014) reviewed best practice globally and concluded that research must play a much bigger role in educating teachers in many existing teacher education courses. The role of the Practice Tutor in developing strong links between theory and practice, helping students to understand and explore the interconnectedness of educational theories and classroom practices, came from the five core features set out by BERA-RSA (2014). Practice Tutors are well positioned to have the disruptive conversations envisioned by Daly and Milton (2017) to be part of the challenging dialogue between an external mentor and newly trained students, questioning orthodoxies and existing practices. The Practice Tutor therefore requires a strong grasp of the interconnection between research-based theory and practice and an understanding of the intricacies of the new curriculum to underpin such dialogue. Langdon (2014) suggested that the dialogue between mentors and student teachers should be critically engaged and reflective, but that only a minority of in-school mentors fostered this kind of 'educative' dialogue'. The Practice Tutor could, therefore, see their role in terms of professionally developing the mentor by modelling 'educative' conversations.

The Practice Tutor can be seen as an external mentor within the student's school context but will be a leader within the partnership of schools that the students' schools fit within. They could find this position professionally invigorating and destabilising at the same time. In line with the many changes that are happening in the Welsh education system, the Practice Tutors could see their contribution as change-makers and boundary-crossers (Daly and Milton 2017) spreading good practice seen within their network of experience. The requirement to assess the student's practice places them in a position to see and spread good practice and to engage in an educative dialogue or to abjure that role and thereby tacitly support the status quo. The identity that the Practice Tutor takes on or that circumstances and contexts bestow on the Practice Tutor will position them within this spectrum of change-making.

Whether or not the Practice Tutor takes on an identity of change maker will depend to an extent on the agency that they are able to exercise in their current role in school. Teacher agency emerges from a complex interplay of teacher capacity and school conditions. Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) see agency as rooted in past experiences, an ability to envisage multiple future possibilities

and a willingness to take action in the here and now. However, tutors whose current role has conditioned them to see a future encompassing the change-making aspects of the role of a Practice Tutor and who are willing to perform the required actions also need the time and conditions which allow them to exercise that agency.

Valsiner's zone theory, when applied to the development of a professional, construes a professionals' zone of proximal development (ZPD) (after Vygotsky 1978) as a set of possibilities for the development of new knowledge, beliefs, goals and practices. This ZPD is created by the professional's interaction with the environment, the people in it, and the resources it offers. Valsiner (1997) further divides the ZPD into a zone of free movement (ZFM) and a zone of promoted action (ZPA) within the professional context. Goos (2013) considers the ZFM to encompass the resources that can be accessed; the professional code and assessment system within which they work; organisational structures; and importantly organisational cultures, influencing what is accepted as "good" within the professional context. Thus, the ZFM indicates which actions a professional sees as *permitted*, and therefore those that they have the agency to accomplish. The zone of promoted action (ZPA), in this case would contain the actions that were discussed with the Practice Tutors when they were recruited and briefed. It is the interaction of the ZFM and ZPA, or each participant's beliefs regarding their intersection, that will affect the way that each Practice Tutor outplays their role and whether they feel they have the agency to act within the ZPA.

All this indicates a need to explore whether Practice Tutors see their role in the same way as it was explained in their induction and briefings and see themselves as having the agency to act in the ways promoted. Where their particular ZFM aligns with the ZPA they will act with enthusiasm to support mentors and work to ensure student teachers' practice aligns with the Welsh standards for teaching. They will take their place working in consort with others to promote a true sense of a collaborative partnership to ensure a high quality, well qualified teaching workforce for young people in Wales.

Partnership between schools and university teacher educators has been a part of training teachers to different degrees since teacher education courses were first established. However, the emphasis placed on the training in school and that done in universities has changed over recent years. The kinds of partnership envisaged in the OU PGCE in Wales are relatively new in Wales and it is likely that in many schools mentoring continues to be organised using the conventions of 'teaching practice' rather than the 'practice learning' demanded by the new model of partnership. In the 'teaching practice' model, Edwards and Protheroe (2004) state that the university tutors would arrive, observe, feedback and depart. The 'practice learning' model demands that schools undertake responsible, deliberative action to dynamically facilitate the learning of student teachers and seeks to support them in doing so. The partnership must therefore focus on supporting schools as places where both teachers and student teachers are positioned to develop a strong mentoring relationship. The Practice Tutor is key in both providing that support where they can and in reporting back to the partnership where more support or training is required.

Where partnerships are working well, they form learning communities which create 'spaces' for teachers to form professional relationships, share information and provide collegial support (Philips, 2003). Bethell et al. (2020) found that in placing mentoring at the heart of developing a high-quality teaching workforce, Welsh reform is in line with national policy changes in ITE in other countries and identified this as a driver for mentor development. However, Milton et al. (2020) see a need to probe more deeply into the readiness of schools to function as learning communities. They argue for significant investment in mentor development in order to meet the expectations of their educative roles within such communities. Estyn (2018b) state that the quality of mentoring is variable and that

in too many cases student teachers do not receive mentoring that allows them to make good progress.

Young and MacPhail's (2016) study of practice in Northern Ireland concludes that functioning learning communities were hard to find. They found a school placement process which lacked an infrastructure to support change or exchange of knowledge and few opportunities for those involved in training teachers to work together. They recommend that teacher education institutions clearly define and communicate the roles and expectations of all school placement stakeholders, establish effective working partnerships with schools and support and establish relationships that promote professional growth and learning. Research from Armour and Yelling (2004) and Cuenca (2011) suggests that a structured approach to CPD must be offered if this is to be fulfilled. Where Practice Tutors come from schools that see themselves as learning organisations, in the sense promoted by the Welsh Government, they will be best placed to promote professional growth for the students, mentors and colleagues in their own school.

The BERA-RSA (2014) report found ample evidence that where research informed practice in training teachers the quality of teachers was enhanced. In the Welsh professional standards for teaching and leadership, teachers are required to be both consumers of research on teaching and engaged in researching their practice. Furlong et al. (2021) state that, in terms of content, universities have access to forms of knowledge that are not universally available in schools, indicating that universities have something important to contribute to professional teacher education. They describe this as a distinctive approach to engagement with knowledge that derives from the university's distinctive purpose in society, that is research. Barnett (1990) argues that universities offer a conversation where the participants are willing to expose their viewpoint to the critical gaze of others.

Furlong et al. (2021) see that universities are very different from schools. The schools' essential contribution to professional learning stems first and foremost from the skills, knowledge and understandings that derive from the need to act; their expertise is, by definition, contextually based. The requirement for Welsh ITE accreditation is that universities offer something different, something complementary to the training that students receive in school, both in terms of the content of the knowledge they bring and in terms of the educative processes. University staff involved in teacher education should be research active and embedded in the university's scholarly culture. Practice Tutors are school staff, but they are also required to mediate the relationship of the schools with the university and in that way, they have a central role in encouraging student teachers in meeting the requirement to use research to inform their practice.

The research is clear that the role of the Practice Tutor is a vital one in linking the essential research-based knowledge of the university to the equally essential practice-based knowledge of the school. However, it also shows that the role has to be intricate and demanding if it is to ensure and add to the quality of provision for PGCE Wales students. They have to fulfil a supportive and nurturing role whilst taking on the role of change-makers and boundary-crossers, having difficult educative discussions and promoting the new Welsh curriculum and schools as learning organisations. They must be prepared to act as members of the university promoting research-based practice and exposing their viewpoint to the critical gaze of others even though they are embedded in schools. Exploring how much of this role is recognised by the Practice Tutor, what they overtly seek to be in that role and what they find challenging is the point of this research.

3. Methodology

Research Questions

Reviewing the literature, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the professional characteristics held by Practice Tutors?
- How does a Practice Tutor understand the nature of their role?
- What understanding of high-quality teaching does a Practice Tutor have?
- What does the Practice Tutor view as the role of research in initial teacher education?

Methods

In this two-year, blended learning PGCE programme, students are recruited then linked with placement schools and assigned Practice Tutors from lead partner schools (Figure 2) who continue to be their practice tutor for the entire course. The initial research design was conceived before the first student cohort began and prior to the appointment of Practice Tutors. The research was designed to elicit details of Practice Tutors' expertise, values and preconceptions related to the role and to teacher education. The planned data collection included workshops and interviews with Practice Tutors as the first cohort of students began the programme. Practice Tutors would be asked to record details of their experiences in a reflective journal, before exploring the actuality of their role and interactions in a follow-up interview towards the end of the first academic year (Appendix 1). The research plan gained OU HREC approval.

The research team comprised one OU tutor, and two lecturers who had been central to the design and implementation of the new PGCE programme. The OU tutor had significant personal experience of school teaching and leadership in Wales, but was not employed in the PGCE partnership. Practice Tutors across the primary and secondary phases were invited to participate in online workshops and interviews in autumn 2020 (Appendix 2). However, probably mainly due to Covid-19-related challenges in schools, Practice Tutors did not feel that they had the capacity to participate and did not volunteer.

The OU PGCE partnership, including the research team, following ethical guidelines (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009) prioritised the wellbeing of all members of the partnership and thus participant recruitment was paused. A second invitation was sent out when the situation was felt to have stabilised but that also failed to recruit Practice Tutors. This was followed by making direct contact with Practice Tutors personally known to the team to explore barriers. One Practice Tutor shared their apprehension about the commitment required to complete a reflective journal, at a time when schools were still under huge pressure. The research design was amended to include one 30-minute semi-structured Practice Tutor interview. The schedule for the interview was developed by the three researchers, piloted with one interviewee, slightly revised and then used for the other 4 interviews.

The interview schedule (Appendix 3) was shared with participants in advance of the online interviews which were conducted by the OU tutor-researcher in spring 2021, approximately 6 months after the start of the PGCE programme. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) transcripts were analysed by a process of inductive coding (Table 1).

Table 1 Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 87).

	Phase	Description of Process
1	Familiarising yourself with the data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2	Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3	Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4	Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5	Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6	Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

Transcribed data was entered into an excel spreadsheet. Thirty initial codes were generated in phase 2 of the analysis before themes were identified and reviewed in later phases of the analysis. Once a draft report of the findings, discussion and recommendations had been compiled this was shared with participants, inviting them to comment on the report.

4. Findings

The five Practice Tutor participants were from three primary schools in urban South Wales. All the participants were experienced teacher educators, having supported student teachers within other university partnerships. They demonstrated that they understood many important aspects of the Practice Tutor role as outlined in the literature section. Their understanding seemed to be informed and influenced by their previous experience of working with student teachers from other university partnerships and by their engagement with the new mandates for training quality teachers in Wales.

Whilst the respondents had varying positional roles, from teachers with four years in the profession to deputy headteachers with over two decades of experience, a number of common key characteristics became apparent from the data. These included an appreciation of the need to be an 'effective communicator', to be 'supportive in tone' and to give constructive feedback. This extended to the recognition reported by several respondents that Practice Tutors had to be prepared to engage in 'difficult conversations' where necessary.

The Practice Tutors all perceptively referred to their own range of mentoring strategies. Most respondents had commenced their role of professional mentoring of student teachers early in their teaching careers and had clearly been determined to reflectively develop their skills over time. Some Practice Tutors referred to their own positive experiences of being mentored.

The ability to develop professional and appropriate relationships was considered very important:

> "I think my only issue that I have as a practice tutor is that … I felt a bit sorry for my students because they didn't know anything about me. They didn't really know my background. They didn't know why I was potentially asked to be a practice tutor and I just think that must have been quite a frightening thing really. Because you've already got your mentor observing you in school, … and you've got this person who you've never met before, she sends you an email to say, you know, you are going to be observed in a couple of weeks … and then you're giving them feedback on something."

There was also an acknowledgement of the need for practice tutors to have excellent pedagogic skills and the necessary experience to underpin the provision of 'grounded' advice. One experienced primary deputy head pointed to the advantages of practice tutors having taught a range of year groups to inform targeted feedback for ITE students with confidence.

Honesty, integrity and respect, featured prominently in a range of clearly held values considered to be vital characteristics of effective Practice Tutors. Respondents also explained how they naturally extended the concept of nurturing from their daily classroom practice to their new role as a practice tutor. One practice tutor highlighted the synergy of values across the partnership:

> '… the Open University is very driven to support student teachers and they do have a high level of care and commitment to the students, which then that's something that I value as well, it's something that I want to support too because I want to make sure that there's the commitment there from me and the school'

Commitment of the wider school community is also evident as Practice tutors noted that senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants worked together to ensure that some Practice tutors had sufficient release time.

A range of necessary attributes seen to be required in the role included being seen as 'firm but fair' as well as a visible enthusiasm reflected in a 'smiley face'. Throughout the interviews there was a recurring sense of the personal commitment seen in the quote above, as well as empathy and intrinsic motivation that was summed up by one practice tutor who noted that they would be 'forever learning'. One respondent highlighted a need to continually be 'choosing optimum moments to intervene, push students on, be prepared to problem solve with them and maintain a willingness and an enthusiasm to really see them progress.'

All interviewees expressed great personal satisfaction from helping others to develop as teachers and the practice tutor role was framed as a natural extension of their existing school-based leadership positions. Associated comments included, 'getting to know people, their strengths and weaknesses', 'giving them a little push and being supportive' and 'seeing them grow and take their wings and fly''.

Aspects of other current experiences of partnership working emerged from all responses. Whilst these had a range of foci, collaboration was cited as an important aspect of the OU approach. Each practice tutor had prior experience of local school cluster working which often led to the development of shared training or pedagogical resources. The Curriculum for Wales 2022 was presented as a major stimulus for increased purposeful collaboration. Teachers and schools had found the development period, prior to 2020, liberating and welcome, and articulated a feeling of increased agency.

Collaborating with other adult educators was perceived as 'highly motivating' and visiting a range of placement schools and collaborating with the PGCE students was viewed as adding to each practice tutors' personal and professional knowledge. When discussing the learning opportunities gained from visiting other schools one practice tutor was prompted to question whether further exchange of school and classroom practice could be formally arranged for those working in the partnership. There was an acknowledgement that with current Welsh curriculum reform, the evolving curriculum 'is very different from school to school', suggesting that acknowledging, appreciating and learning from the differences in curriculum design could also extend to an exchange of approaches to different areas of learning, such as pupil assessment and educating teachers new to the profession. Planning and providing opportunities to share and showcase approaches was suggested as a partnership activity that all students and professionals could gain from at this time of great change in the Welsh education system.

The OU students were also seen as potential collaborators. Students were acknowledged as informed individuals, often prepared to be at the 'frontline' of change with 'up-to-date' teaching methods. It was remarked upon that when 'partners' collaborated, drawing upon a range of skills and perspectives, many benefits had emerged from constructive critical dialogue.

There was a sense of professional gratitude amongst Practice Tutors to the Welsh Government for the opportunity for schools to be creative and to design a 'bespoke' curriculum. This was coupled with a sense of 'autonomy and agency' with the 'Four Purposes' a major reference point. However, there were assertions that professional learning had be supported and an associated increased workload should be addressed.

All respondents had experienced personal involvement in action research. From these experiences and professional learning, there was an appreciation that an element of 'trial and error' would contribute to, and hopefully result in, an emerging curriculum that will inspire learners. One more experienced respondent highlighted the need to ensure that assessment and 'appropriate progression' were given due consideration as part of a future evolving curriculum which they felt had the scope to be very exciting, as long as assessment and accountability measures do not restrict the possibilities.

All respondents had experienced leadership training prior to being appointed as a practice tutor. Examples included deputy headteachers completing the NPQH, teachers attending middle leader courses provided by local universities, modules studied as part of the Welsh Masters in Educational Practice and OU Masters' study. This personal commitment demonstrated and evidenced by all respondents, was often encouraged by senior leadership within schools which exhibited many of the traits and successes of a learning organisation.

The time taken to optimally facilitate the role of the practice tutor was discussed by most participants. Most of the practice tutors were pleased to benefit from the allocation of some flexible leadership time. There was a general sense that having this time was extremely important to be able to engage promptly with students and other OU professionals involved in the collaborative process. The school allocations of leadership time varied, and one respondent referred to a concern that the amount of work required to fulfil the role necessitated some evenings spent catching up. This was considered a challenge to be addressed moving forward.

The role of practice tutor involves liaising with school-based mentors, the OU academic and pastoral tutors and the students themselves. One respondent noted that the pandemic had excluded all face-to-face meetings and observations and thereby reduced the amount of travel time as online communication was necessitated. The pandemic was widely reported to have accelerated the move towards online working with one respondent claiming that, 'lockdown has had a huge impact on how we learn in schools. Online learning is everything that we do at the moment.'

The interviewees overwhelmingly enjoyed the opportunities provided by this new role. Several explicitly stated how they had been selected by headteachers following previous successful mentoring experiences. Overall, practice tutors viewed their role as 'rewarding'

and they embraced the responsibility to oversee and guide the steps of students from entering the classroom to becoming a 'fully fledged' teacher.

Summary

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that Practice Tutors drew on and valued a range of prior experience across a variety of in-school and wider roles (Figure 3). For each of these, there was an expectation that curriculum reforms, including the OU PGCE partnership would offer further opportunities for personal professional development as well as new ways of collaborating with all stakeholders.
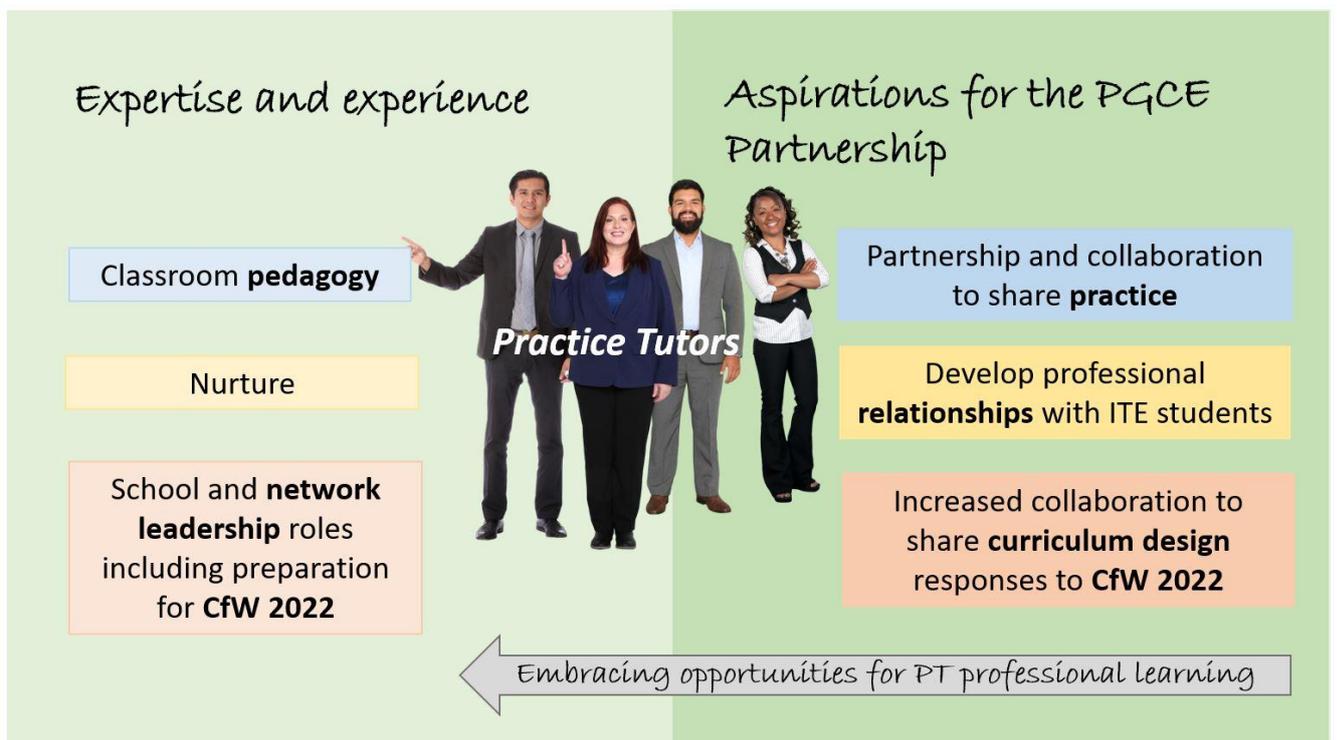

Figure 3 Practice Tutor expertise and aspirations.

5. Discussion

The findings answer the research questions in that they indicate the professional characteristics held by practice tutors, how the practice tutors understand their role, what their understanding of high-quality teaching is and how the practice tutor views the role of research in training pre-service teachers? They show that the practice tutors interviewed had a clear picture of themselves as part of a partnership that was collaborative and offered opportunities to those within it to learn from one another and to be more than the sum of its parts.

They understood their role as a key cog in this machine exemplifying what it means to be a teacher in Wales to the students. Their enthusiasm for the role of mentor cannot be overstated. These practice tutors saw that a mentor treats others with honesty integrity and respect whilst being both prepared to nurture and to challenge student teachers They understood their role as one of intervening as necessary and problem-solving with the mentor or student, not dictating the solution. The way that they spoke leads to the question of how far they saw themselves as modelling the role of mentor to the mentors they work with as some statements could be interpreted as that they saw themselves as another mentor for the student. At this early stage, with contact constrained by the pandemic, it is understandable that the participants talked in terms of their previous extensive experience as mentors, seeing themselves bringing that experience to the new role, rather than seeing a clear distinction between the two roles. From the research point of view a need to develop the cohort's understanding of the similarities and differences between the role of mentor and that of the practice tutor could be construed.

The interviewees saw the need for practice tutors to have good pedagogic skills to allow them to proffer advice that was grounded. In this they echo the ideas of being able to engage in a truly educative discourse (Langdon 2014) with their charges and being prepared for the disruptive conversations envisaged by Daly and Milton (2017) when appropriate, to ensure the best of outcomes. They did not use Langdon's terms of reflective or critically engaged choosing rather terms which indicated empathic conversations and "firm but fair" dealings but the context in which they spoke made clear that their discourse would "push students on" to "grow and take their wings and fly''.

One aspect of the role that we saw no evidence for was the taking theory into practice and the role of published research in education, although they did mention using action research to develop practice. This is unsurprising given that the students were all studying the initial modules and only move onto masters level modules where these aspects are vital in the following year and that the focus of this year was on gaining enough classroom practice and that neither aspect was explicit in the questions. However, bearing in mind the importance placed on these aspects by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government 2019) and by Estyn (Estyn 2018) in professional learning, highlighting the necessity of including these ideas in their conversations may be indicated in development opportunities designed for the practice tutors.

It was very clear that the practice tutors interviewed were in favour of the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW, 2022). They saw opportunities in the agency afforded to schools to develop curricula that met the needs of their pupils in their contexts and were enthusiastic to engage in doing this. They were honest in recognising that implementing the new curriculum would be challenging and that finding the time to design their school curriculum effectively was, and will continue to be, difficult. They queried whether the OU in Wales could be proactive in using its Wales-wide network to allow schools to share their ideas and learn from each other as they

implement CfW (2022). This may be a way to make sure that the relationship is two-way: the PGCE giving as well as asking.

Time was also acknowledged as a necessity in carrying out the role of practice tutor and although several of the practice tutors had the luxury of having a role that allowed them the flexibility to find the time required, others had to carve the time out of an already busy schedule. Working in the evenings is a regular aspect of full-time teaching but one practice tutor felt that they had to work even more hours out of school in order to fulfil the role of practice tutor to their satisfaction. This is a further point of development for the partnership to take on board in their discussions with schools. The time taken to execute the role of practice tutor is not inconsiderable and as a sense of normality is reached after the restrictions of Covid-19 even more time will be required as practice tutors will be required, and will want, to visit the students' placement schools to observe and discuss with the students and mentors in their contexts.

Each of the interviewed practice tutors had received targeted professional learning opportunities, particularly concerning learning about taking a leadership role, within their schools. They felt that they had further possibilities in this regard open to them and that they had the agency to take up the training they needed. What they looked for from the PGCE in Wales was a wider view and an opportunity to collaborate and learn from others beyond their immediate networks. The forums specifically aimed at the practice tutors and the professional learning offered by the OU go some way to providing these opportunities. The constraints of last year will have limited both the motivation and time available to engage in these, but as things start to normalise raising the profile of the many opportunities offered is likely to be welcomed by the practice tutors.

Practice tutors all seemed to overwhelmingly enjoy the opportunities provided by this new role. Several explicitly stated how they had been selected by headteachers following previous successful mentoring experiences. Overall, practice tutors viewed their role as 'rewarding' and embraced the responsibility to oversee and guide the steps of students from entering the classroom to becoming a 'fully fledged' teacher.

Limitations of the study

All of the practice tutors interviewed were from urban primary schools in South Wales, and we acknowledge both this and the low number of participants as limitations to being able to make any firm recommendations from this study. Three participants were also from one school which further limits any prospect of making general statements.

Within both the primary and the secondary sectors there will be diversity but the differences between primary and secondary contexts and ethos are likely to be greater than that between schools in each sector. Primary schools are usually much smaller in size than secondary schools and they have historically different curriculum arrangements with primary generally seen as having more autonomy. It is likely that a recent emphasis on play pedagogy in KS2 and the greater advancements in implementing CfW (2022) mean that networking and collaboration are more embedded in the primary sector. Hence, extrapolating the findings from this study to practice tutors from secondary schools is unwise.

6. Recommendations

These recommendations emerged from our analysis of the findings; however, they should be read in the light of the limitations above.

For future studies:

Work with school-based colleagues, including Practice Tutors, throughout the research process from formulation of research questions to dissemination of findings and recommendations. Ensure that in future partnership research, the expectations in terms of data collection are clear.

Review the experiences and reflections of Practice Tutors as the first PGCE cohort complete their studies and in non-covid time.

Explore aspirations in terms of the operation and evaluation of the partnership using insights from students, Practice Tutors, mentors and Open University staff.

For further development of the Practice Tutors:

Explore the extent to which Practice Tutors are supporting mentors and students to engage with theory and research in the co-construction of knowledge about teaching.

Explore the mentoring/coaching dynamic, to what extent do practice tutors see themselves as mentoring the mentor?

Reflect on the model and as new practice tutors are recruited reflect on how they are inducted by the central team and the demands made on them.

Explore the values, expertise, experiences of secondary Practice tutors – see comments at bottom of discussion.

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