

The Triad of Success Factors that can Strengthen Student Teacher Mentoring

A key aspect of supporting student teachers effectively is adopting appropriate mentoring approaches. This piece presents the early findings of a study that collected insights from student teachers and those who support them as they train to teach. In parallel to the mentoring literature the different roles a mentor has is evident as their multi-faceted role is discussed. However, the three key factors of relationships, professional learning and time emerge as being critically interwoven and underpin successful mentoring approaches.

Keywords: student teachers, mentoring, professional learning

The concept of mentoring in teacher education is often challenged, with the focus for mentoring models changing over time from those demanding the mere transmission of knowledge to one of more professional accountability (Parker et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a supportive school environment plays a critical role in the experiences of both the mentor and mentee (Kemmis et al., 2014), but mentoring cannot be refined to one approach, a much more multi-dimensional experience is apparent, as no one size fits all (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021; Parker et al., 2021).

Such change is also evident under the recent Initial Teacher Education reforms in Wales (Furlong et al., 2021). The Qualified Teacher Status standards in Wales have also been recently redesigned to support student teachers to meet practitioner standards relevant to teaching the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2019). A new postgraduate program delivered in partnership between schools and the Open University in Wales since September 2020 differs from the more traditional one-year postgraduate program many people study following an undergraduate degree if they wish to train to teach. The new postgraduate program offers a more flexible route into the teaching profession; with a part-time or a salaried option studied over a two-year period (The Open University, 2022). This allows student teachers to continue in existing employment, which may or may not be within a school setting and /or ensures they have the time for other commitments alongside their study. The program is delivered via blended

learning, combining distance learning with practice learning in placement schools (Glover & Hutchinson, 2022).

In a drive to understand which mentoring approaches are most effective and what is the key to their success, a research study was developed to investigate the new postgraduate program's mentoring approaches. This paper discusses some of the study's initial findings. The data was gathered via separate group discussions with student teachers and university lecturers, school-based mentor interviews, and audio or written reflections from practice tutors, who are also based in schools and have a similar role to the traditional university lecturer, and school coordinators, who have senior oversight of teacher education in a school. In total 27 individuals contributed.

Key messages from the literature highlight the multi-faceted but vital role the mentor plays in teacher development (Estyn, 2018). As briefly discussed, there are different hats a mentor is expected to wear and include for example, i). collaborator, ii). judge, iii). model (Hobson & Malderez, 2013). The variation in approaches adopted for mentoring between schools is also acknowledged (Forster et al., 2021). However, all of this is further exasperated by the dovetailing of changes in teacher education in Wales alongside the launch of an ambitious learner-centered Curriculum for Wales in September 2022. The resultant increase in schools' engagement in these processes has meant a wide variation in approaches to in-school mentoring of student teachers. Indeed, research agrees that a range of factors such as the mentor's workload, time and training available, and the relationship that develops between the mentor and mentee impact on how mentors approach their role and indeed how much capacity is available for them to dedicate to the mentee (Chan, 2020; Howard, 2021).

Research findings

The early indications from this research found three key interwoven features for an effective approach to mentoring in teacher education. On launching the research study, which included using social media to engage possible school involvement, the level of interest exceeded expectations. Many positive responses to participate were received from all the roles involved in delivering teacher education across the school /university partnership. This study is against the backdrop of schools being developed as learning organizations (Welsh Government, 2018); which also contributed to informing the program's approach to mentor training and development. This is particularly true in terms of the university working in partnership with its partner schools in order to foster equality and mutual learning, and influence future approaches. This strong collaboration is reflected highly in the enthusiasm with which the partner schools supported and engaged with this research project.

Critical success factors

During early familiarization with the data, it became apparent that to implement a successful teacher education mentoring process three key aspects are required. Early familiarization of data involved the research team discussing the interview/focus group discussion experiences and initial coding of the interview and discussion data. During the initial coding of the data, it became apparent that many points raised by the research participants were included under one of the three main themes of 'relationships', 'professional learning' and 'time'. As shown in Figure

1, these are very much interdependent and underpin effective mentoring. Each component of the triad is elaborated upon in the following sections.

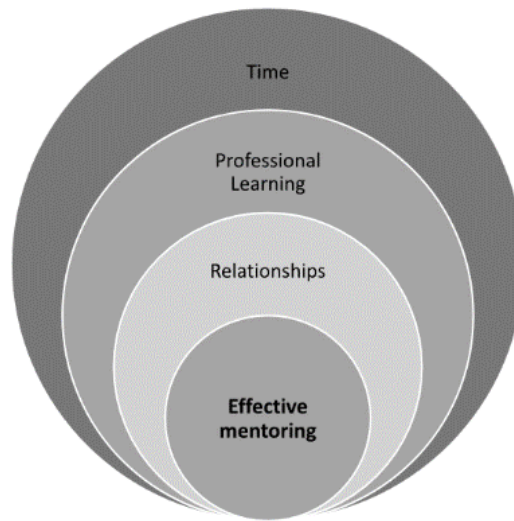


Figure 1. The triad of critical factors necessary to support effective mentoring.

Relationships

‘The best mentors I have observed are the ones who have formed good professional relationships by giving their time and as a result the students have been confident to try new things and to step up to the role feeling fully supported.’ (Practice tutor)

The above quote from one of the research participants offers an insight into understanding the foundations for an effective mentoring process and the positive impact that a mentor can have on a student teacher’s development. All the research study’s participants highlighted the relationship between the mentor and mentee as being crucial for success. Establishing a mutual understanding of how the mentoring process would work and what each person could bring to the experience emerged as a key starting point for all participants. Not only for the mentee but importantly for the mentor as well. It was emphasized that this relationship needs to be flexible and adaptive to the needs of the student and their context, experience and progress. It is apparent that there is a ‘no one size fits all’ approach to mentoring but that there are bespoke and personalized methods working across the school/university partnership. This is evidenced through an openness for team teaching, student-led mentor meetings and the encouragement of self-analysis. All of which demonstrate a positive student-mentor relationship which contributes to delivering an effective mentoring experience.

Professional learning

Mentors frequently referred to their lack of current and up to date knowledge and understanding of mentoring approaches and activities. They expressed a desire to learn but reported that they need the space and resources to engage with training materials and events. A definite aspiration

to engage, collaborate and explore approaches to mentoring with other mentors also emerged, as illustrated by one mentor's comment:

'It's always good to work together and to collaborate because two heads are better than one. And so that is something that I think I would benefit from; just working with other mentors during the training sessions. I do find it really helpful meeting up with other people to see what their experiences are and how they do things. And can I magpie things from them.' (Mentor)

Some mentors reported that they want to work across sectors, e.g., with those in Welsh Medium, and phases – working with colleagues teaching older or younger students. They commented on the benefit of working together to moderate and quality assure both approaches to mentoring and their assessment judgements against the professional standards for teaching. There is a clear desire to know who the other mentors are in the school/university partnership to enable a better collaborative experience for both mentors and mentees.

Time

Again, all the research participants commented on time as a pivotal element in the effectiveness of the critical success factors for mentoring. For example, the following sums up one student teacher's views, as they recognized the competing priorities their mentor has on their time.

'It's not necessarily something that any of us can change because of the nature of schools, but it does come down to time and the amount of time your mentor has for you, and obviously they try and give you as much time as possible, but they have a lot of other commitments within the school.' (Student teacher)

Mentors in teacher education need sufficient time to build relationships and time to develop their own professional knowledge. In those schools where time is allocated to both the role and professional learning in the role, mentors reported being empowered, acknowledged and recognized. Student teachers recognize too that this has a positive impact on them. But where schools have staff engaged in multiple roles (e.g. teacher, leadership responsibility, mentor), all those involved in the mentoring noted that their high workload and level of responsibility can have a negative impact on how well they are able to fully engage with the mentoring process to the extent that they want. All mentors want to do the best they can, but not all are given the tools or adequate time to do so.

Conclusion

This research discovered that mentoring in teacher education is most effective when both the mentor and student teacher enjoy a positive relationship as this provides students with the 'emotional safety' to engage in self-reflection and critical conversations, as they work towards developing their own professional independence and identity. Other key factors to emerge are professional learning and time; however, these two factors need to come hand in hand. Time without training would not necessarily lead to improved practice as the mentors may not have the

necessary updated skills and knowledge to undertake the role. Training without time would impact on the workload of the school-based mentor and the thinking space needed to absorb and engage with the training content.

During the fieldwork for this research study, it became apparent that each school offers a unique perspective, system and process for mentoring their student teachers. Some schools approach time allocation differently and where this is done effectively, school-based mentors are supported to engage in professional learning and build meaningful, positive relationships with their student teachers. There are plans for case studies to showcase effective mentoring practices and in-depth analysis of the data to understand all the critical success factors that influence the mentoring process. Future research projects to be considered include examining the key approaches, characteristics and success factors of the partnership schools' different mentoring models.

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***Alison Glover, Ph.D.** is a Research Associate for the PGCE Wales Programme at the Open University in Wales. Her research interests include teacher education and embedding Education for Sustainable Development in the curriculum. She can be contacted at alison.glover@open.ac.uk.*

***Megan Jones, M.A.** is a Curriculum Tutor for Primary for the PGCE Wales Programme at the Open University in Wales. Her research interests include early childhood development, language acquisition and mentoring in teacher education. She can be contacted at megan.jones@open.ac.uk.*

***Angela Thomas** is a Practice Tutor and consultant for the PGCE Wales Programme at the Open University in Wales. Her interests include mentoring in teacher education and professional development for teachers. She can be contacted at angela.thomas@open.ac.uk.*

***Leigh Worrall, M.A.** - is a Curriculum Tutor for English for the PGCE Wales Programme at The Open University in Wales. Her research interests include Curriculum for Wales reform, international approaches to teacher education and mentoring in teacher education. She can be contacted at leigh.worrall@open.ac.uk.*

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