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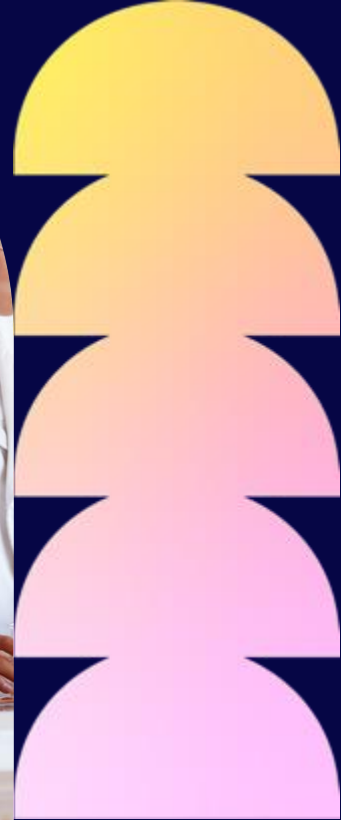
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Professional conversations

Improving practice through collaborative reflection

Final PRAXIS funded project report
232410 GC

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The Open University ITE Partnership PGCE
August 2024

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Contents

List of figures	4
Glossary	4
Executive summary	5
Abstract	7
1. Introduction	8
1.1 Background	8
2. Literature Review	11
2.1 Key findings from the literature	11
2.2 Context and rationale	12
2.3 Purpose of a professional conversation	14
2.4 Influential factors	15
2.5 Knowledge, skills and attributes	18
2.6 Planning professional conversations	20
2.7 The content of professional conversations	22
2.8 Conducting professional conversations	23
2.9 The impact of professional conversations	26
2.10 Challenges of professional conversations	27
2.11 Planning for improvement	28
2.12 Summary	29
3. Methodology	30
3.1 Overview	30
4. Discussion of findings	31
4.1 Defining professional conversations	31
4.2 Important elements of a professional conversation	33
4.3 Preparing for the review meeting	37
4.4 Skills, knowledge and attributes	41
4.5 Suggestions to improve professional conversations	44
5. Conclusions	46
5.1 Key findings	46
5.2 Recommendations	48
References	49
Appendix: Discussion group and interview questions	53

List of figures

Figure 2.1 Factors influencing professional conversations..... 11

Glossary

Term	Definition
AT	Associate Teacher
EBI	Even better if
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NAPL	National Approach to Professional Learning
NSERE	National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry
OU	The Open University
PGCE	Post Graduate Certificate in Education
PL	Professional Learning
PLA	Practice Learning Activity
PLP	Professional Learning Profile
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
WWW	What went well

Executive summary

This PRAXIS-funded research project was designed to provide insight into professional conversations, as reported by the Open University Initial Teacher Education (OU ITE) Partnership Mentors and Practice Tutors.

The OU ITE Partnership in Wales offers student teachers a part-time or salaried training route into teaching that is completed over two years. The programme is delivered via blended learning that combines distance learning with practice learning in schools.

Key messages from the literature

The purpose of a professional conversation:

- Focused on practice and pedagogy
- Inclusive when dialogic in nature
- To improve practice by collaboration and engagement in reflection

Influential factors for professional conversations:

- Culture and environment
- A shared goal
- A collective approach to deeper learning

Knowledge, skills and attributes:

- Secure knowledge of the programme and professional standards
- Shared expectations of roles, behaviours and goals
- Equal participation
- Effective communication skills, empathetic, and evaluative
- Open to new ideas, work cooperatively
- Provide and act on support, counsel and direction
- Regular meetings
- Range of methods of communication

- Start from current position, identify strengths and developments
- Guide purposeful change through incremental steps

The content of professional conversations:

- Consider global, national, regional and school priorities
- Begin with student teacher's need
- Offer opportunities for debate, observe and dissect key skills
- Reflect on practice, research and inquiry
- Link to every-day practice

Conducting professional conversations:

- Value insight and equity
- Model language, opinions and inquiry of real-world examples
- Ask questions to support self-reflection
- Draw on support from colleagues
- Use coaching techniques

The impact of professional conversations:

- Emphasise the learning and wellness of students
- Identify how pupils make progress
- Challenge each other to invoke critical thinking
- Respect all participants

Challenges of professional conversations:

- Perceived lack of time
- Interruptions
- Hyper-questioning
- Assessment instead of dialogue

Planning for improvement:

- Promote a culture of collaboration
- Student teachers in Mentors' classes
- Schedule meetings
- Discuss theory and apply to practice

Methodology

A qualitative approach that included a literature review. Ten participants (Practice Tutors, Mentors, student teachers) contributed via discussion group, one-to-one interviews, and written reflections between November 2023 and May 2024.

Findings

Defining professional conversations

- There is no single definition of a professional conversation
- Professional conversations are enabled by good relationship building
- Those who lead the conversations become more adept over time, and develop more nuanced approaches

Important elements of a professional conversation

- Sufficient time
- Active reflection on practice
- Collaborative target setting
- Personalised targets
- Effective questioning
- Interactive in nature
- Refer to appropriate documentation
- Focus on strengths
- Build on positive relationships

Preparing for the review meeting

- Use all documentation
- Build on positive relationship
- Be prepared to be patient and empathetic
- Maintain contact between meetings
- Review video recordings of teaching
- Communicate expectations in advance

Skills, knowledge and attributes

A range of practical skills are required:

- Organisation and communication

- Being supportive, assertive, attentive and open
- The enablement of self-evaluation through effective questioning
- Different types of knowledge required (e.g. teacher's context)

Suggestions to improve professional conversations

- High levels of professionalism
- Practice Tutors improve knowledge (e.g. professional standards)
- Ensure positive, honest and fair two-way conversation
- Develop listening and questioning skills
- Include overarching targets along with specific ones
- Consider student teacher's well-being

Conclusions

Professional conversations are integral to professional development, and implicit in the way that Practice Tutors on the OU ITE Programme carry out their role. Professional conversations are based on practice, and evidence from practice. Several key elements were reported to be critical for effective conversations:

- Sufficient preparation time
- Shared personal target setting
- Strong relationships
- Effective listening skills
- Awareness of student teacher's well-being

Further research to establish the role and expectations of the student teacher, and to determine effective questions to promote reflection, along with the creation of professional **learning resources** would contribute to improving the quality of future professional conversations in ITE.

Abstract

Professional conversations are an integral element of teacher education, and take place between student teachers and those supporting them. However, defining a professional conversation is not entirely straightforward, with divergence existing between policy makers and practitioners.

The Practice Tutor role is unique to the Open University Initial Teacher Education Partnership. Practice Tutors undertake professional conversations with Mentors and student teachers during review meetings, and this study provides insight into these conversations. It also develops understanding of the impact on student teachers' learning and Mentors' professional development. Ten participants (Practice Tutors, student teachers and Mentors) contributed via a discussion group, individual interviews or written reflections.

Key findings include the critical element of good relationship building being vital in defining a professional conversation, with those leading such conversations becoming more adept over time. Appropriate preparation time and supported reflection are important, with collaborative target setting, and questioning and challenge being significant for professional conversations to be effective. Consequently, those leading professional conversations need well-developed skills and attributes such as being supportive, organised, knowledgeable and good communicators.

This study discovered that there is a clear need to support the delivery of effective professional conversations in teacher education. It is essential that resources target the development of softer skills, such as questioning. Further research is proposed to understand student teachers' expectations of, and readiness for the professional conversation experience.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

- *The Open University Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course outline and professional conversations*
- *The Practice Tutor role*
- *Previous PGCE programme research*



This project looked at the continuing development of the Practice Tutor role, which is unique to the Open University (OU) Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Wales partnership. This research followed other studies that had explored the role of the Practice Tutor (Lee, Addison-Pettit and Tyler, 2021), approaches to effective mentoring (Glover et al., 2024), and the use of technology to enhance lesson reflection (Glover et al., 2023b). The project aimed to provide insights into the ‘professional conversations’ between Practice Tutors, students and school Mentors, and understand the impact of these conversations on student teachers’ learning and Mentors’ professional development. These conversations are seen as distinct to the more day-to-day supportive conversations that take place between student teachers and their Mentors.

The PGCE and professional conversations

The OU in Wales offers a two-year PGCE programme leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Students may be registered on either the part-time pathway or are salaried student teachers in a partner school. Students complete two academic courses of 60 credits at level 6 and 60 credits at level 7, as well as 120 days of practice learning placement to complete their qualification. In schools, student teachers are supported by a Mentor, who oversees their day-to-day practice and a Practice Tutor, who carries out a virtual practice review visits and observes recordings of the student teacher teaching (Glover and Hutchinson, 2023). A professional conversation between the Practice Tutor, Mentor and student teacher should take place at each practice review visit, to enable the student to make links between the theory of their academic learning and the practice in their school placement by reflecting on their teaching and progress.

However, the way that ‘professional conversations’ are understood by policy makers might not completely match the reality of these conversations in practice.

This project aimed to define the thinking and theory behind professional conversations as an approach to professional development and understand their reality within the OU ITE context. Stakeholders use and understand the term 'professional conversations' differently. The literature review contributes to identifying the ways in which the term is used and understood. The project's data collection enabled an interrogation of the ways in which the term is used and understood by school-based partners and student teachers; with approaches to improve professional conversations for the benefit of students and those who support them identified.

The Practice Tutor role

Practice Tutors are an essential link in the communication chain between students, Mentors, and the university-based Curriculum Tutors. They offer coaching to Mentors within a cluster and help ensure the quality of student teachers' practice learning experiences. Since the programme is blended, they use a variety of online resources to assist in their work, such as IRIS Connect for lesson observations. Throughout the two years of the PGCE programme, Practice Tutors conduct four online visits to each student teacher to assess progress against the QTS (Qualified Teacher Status) descriptors of the Welsh Professional Standards.

As part of the evaluation of progress towards the Professional Standards of Teaching and Leadership, OU ITE student teachers' use IRIS Connect¹ to record practice twice in year 1 and twice in year 2. The student teachers upload their video to a secure, web-based platform from which the Practice Tutor can provide summative input on the student teachers' development. In accordance with QTS recorded in their Professional Learning Profile (PLP), Practice Tutors examine the student teacher's online teaching folder and practice learning evidence. If required, they also offer further observation or intervention in line with the Student Support Framework. Additionally, they provide student teachers with formative comments and discussion that supports, challenges, and guides them as they critically reflect on their development as practitioners. Practice Tutors also write an assessment report for each student teacher during each module, and meet virtually with school

¹ IRIS Connect is a cloud-based platform that enables teachers to record, reflect and share lessons using video technology.


Mentors to provide support and coaching for the effective mentoring of student teachers.

Previous research

Previous PGCE research into effective mentoring revealed three key areas to promote effective professional conversations on pedagogy: sufficient time, a well-founded social relationship and well-purposed professional learning (Glover et al., 2023a; Glover et al., 2024). In subsequent research into the use of video technology, revelations into the types of feedback via observation forms, feedback sessions and the web-based platform commentary, emphasised the value of professional conversations for student teacher development and their learning (Glover et al., 2023b). As noted by the work of Jones, Tones, and Foulkes (2019), evaluating developmental dialogues between Mentors and student teachers in Initial Teacher Education has led to a sharpened interest in what is understood to be a professional conversation, and how they impact on student teacher development in their school-based practice blocks.

The following literature review explores interpretations of 'professional conversations', and evidence from the literature regarding their purpose and the critical factors that influence this important aspect of teacher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Key findings from the literature	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ A variety of academic papers, government documents, and other publications examined➤ Ten interconnected themes identified as underpinning professional conversations➤ It's not solely what is 'said' in a professional conversation which is important but 'how' they are conducted, that makes for meaningful exchanges➤ Collaboration is key	

The following literature review highlights several important factors that contribute to successful professional conversations. These are shown in Figure 2.1.

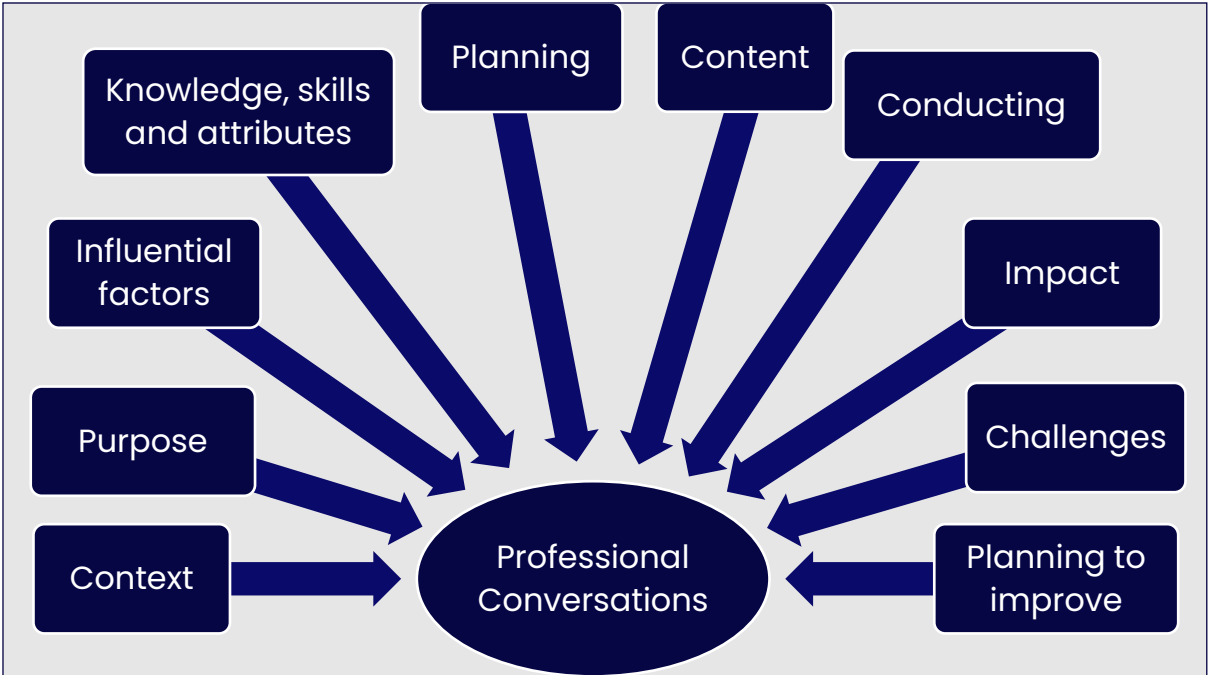


Figure 2.1 Factors influencing professional conversations

2.2 Context and rationale

- *Welsh context*
- *The National Mission*
- *Curriculum for Wales*
- *Schools as a Learning Organisation*
- *National Approach to Professional Learning*
- *National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry*
- *Estyn*
- *Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership*



When considering the role of mentoring and professional conversations, it is important to remember the context within which the development of student teachers is set. Education in Wales has experienced significant reform in recent years as per the National Mission (Welsh Government, 2017) objectives, leading to changes in what is taught in schools and how ITE is conducted (Furlong, 2016; Welsh Government, 2019a). Underpinning the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales is a growing sense of schools becoming learning organisations (OECD, 2016), with the requirement for schools to foster a culture to support and promote professional learning. Teachers are supported to do this by the National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL), and the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE) (OECD, 2021, p. 7). Simultaneously, Estyn (the education and training inspectorate for Wales) clearly articulates its stance on new teachers being able to engage in conversations that are professionally founded.

Inspectors should base their evaluations of student teachers' achievement and progress on the outcomes of observations of their teaching, discussions with student teachers and scrutiny of their work, including their plans and assignments.

(Estyn, 2018, p. 4)

These revised requirements demand a different approach for teachers and, therefore, the way student teachers are introduced to professional learning necessitates a change in teacher education to ensure they are ready to meet the challenges of the National Mission (Welsh Government, 2017). Estyn (2018) also highlight that professional learning should be a career-long process and that the skills of reflection, critical thinking and evaluation should be continually refined and developed throughout a teacher's career. These skills are interwoven throughout the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership (Welsh Government,

2019b), but are particularly evident in the professional standards of collaboration, leadership, and professional learning. The standards articulate the necessity for self-reflection by student teachers but supported by more experienced others. This is evident in the QTS (Qualified Teacher Status) standard for collaboration; seeking advice and support states that “The teacher actively seeks and engages with support from a range of formal and informal sources” and that working with in-school colleagues they strive for “Reflection on developing expertise” (Welsh Government, 2019b, p. 43-44).

The role of the Mentor is also defined within a sustained, highly-effective practice descriptor: “The teacher actively promotes and facilitates collaborative opportunities for staff, both in routine aspects of learning organisation and in innovative approaches”. This is further substantiated by “purposeful and structured contributions to the development of teachers and other staff” (Welsh Government, 2019b p. 45). To enable improvement, there is a clear expectation from the Welsh Government that teachers will engage professionally to identify strengths and areas for development and will support teachers throughout their career; embedding professional dialogue is an effective way of working.

This view is not unique to Wales. Amidst English ITE reform, “both Mentor and student teacher [should be] willing and able to engage in articulation, critique, and expansion as the outcomes of that learning” (Lofthouse, 2018, p. 255). One suggested vehicle for this is a professional conversation. Professional conversations or dialogues were first highlighted as an enabler of professional development by Nsibande (2007) and are implicit in the way that Practice Tutors on the OU in Wales PGCE programme carry out some of the functions of their role. Nevertheless, previous research concluded that more work could be undertaken to help Practice Tutors to support their Mentors and student teachers through these professional conversations, particularly to facilitate links between theory and practice (Lee, Addison-Pettit and Tyler, 2021, p. 17).

2.3 Purpose of a professional conversation

- *Are successful when they focus on practice and pedagogy*
- *Are inclusive when they are dialogic in nature*
- *Improve the practice if interlocutors are interactive, collaborative and engage in reflection and/or enquiry*



Alexander (2008) presents a compelling account of the power of talk in teaching and learning in which it supports the shaping of learner thinking. Alexander advocates fostering a productive learning environment where dialogic, interactive discourse is common. They are careful to draw attention to the purpose of a professional conversation, defining dialogue as “an organised process of questioning and discussing topics that lead to and facilitate common understanding, minimise risk and error, and accelerate the handover of concepts and principles” (Alexander, 2008, p. 10), which closely aligns with the understanding of how learners develop.

According to Nsibandé (2007), a professional conversation between a student teacher and Mentor is a critical interaction that occurs within the context of teacher professional development. It encompasses various forms, such as feedback conversations, post-lesson debriefs, post-observation discussions, and teacher supervision/mentoring meetings. These conversations serve as a platform for collaborative knowledge construction and reflection. The Mentor and student teacher engage in dialogue, fostering learning and growth where the Mentor’s role is pivotal in facilitating an exchange that supports the student teacher’s development of professional competence.

Nsibandé’s insights emphasise the significance of these conversations in shaping effective teaching practices and enhancing the Mentor-student teacher relationship. By engaging in purposeful dialogue, both Mentor and student teacher contribute to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning processes. Jones et al. (2021) also remind us that monological conversations assist student teachers in solving immediate challenges in relation to managing the immediate learning environment. However, this style of conversation can limit the time and space for reflection and innovation. They also advocate for the importance of dialogic conversations, where interlocutors are interactive, collaborative and engage participants in reflection or enquiry to improve the practice of everyone involved.

There is debate around the vocabulary 'dialogue' and 'conversation'. For example, Alexander (2008) notes one view of a conversation to be the more natural, unstructured discussion around practice and on the other hand a dialogue can indicate a two-way interactive exchange. "Where conversation often consists of a sequence of unchained two-part exchanges as participants talk at or past each other (though it can be very different), [classroom] dialogue explicitly seeks to make attention and engagement mandatory and to chain exchanges into a meaningful sequence" (Alexander, 2008, p. 104).

Not all the literature makes clear distinctions between the two and they are used arbitrarily.

In this study, they will be referred to as '*professional conversations*' with a shared understanding that a critical evaluation of pedagogical content between two or more participants with shared goals of identifying how improvements can be made through reciprocal learning.

2.4 Influential factors

- *The native culture and environment*
- *Sociocultural influences are far-reaching*
- *A shared goal to create new meanings can provide direction for professional conversations*
- *A collective approach to deeper learning contributes to breadth and depth*



When referring to professional conversations, the culture and environment surrounding the planning, participation in, and reflection on this as a tool for improvement might also be considered. Zuengler and Miller (2006) note:

[..] of significance for SLA [Sociocultural Linguistic Approach] research is the understanding that when learners' appropriate mediational means, such as language, is made available as they interact in socioculturally meaningful activities, these learners gain control over their own mental activity and can begin to function independently. (Zuengler and Miller, 2006, p. 39)

They also noted “effecting change in our classrooms will not result from imposing solutions from outside, but from nurturing effectual practices that are indigenous to our particular contexts” (Zuengler and Miller, 2006, p. 295). The culture and environment will not only differ from each individual school context, but also with each Mentor and student teacher relationship. Vygotsky (2011), Halliday (2004) and Hall (2012) have argued that sociocultural approaches impact greatly on the progress of learners and argue that language learning can be interpreted as knowledge learning where, in essence, student teachers are learning the language of their trade.

Sociocultural influences play a significant role in shaping professional conversations. According to Vygotsky, our cognitive functions are shaped by interactions with those around us who are ‘more skilled’. Some of the sociocultural factors that impact on professional conversations include:

- Cultural norms and beliefs
- Language and communication
- Power dynamics
- Socialisation and group identity
- Conflict resolution styles

It seems apparent that sociocultural influences impact not only what Mentors say but also how they say it in professional conversations. Being culturally competent enhances collaboration, empathy, and effective communication in diverse work environments. Edwards-Groves and Hardy (2013) provide much insight, but also advocate for the importance of dialogic conversations:

*[..] the practices of collaborative, critical reflexive dialogues on the part of the teachers contributed significantly to the development of the dialogic practices within literacy learning in the classrooms.
(Edwards-Groves and Hardy, 2013, p. 1)*

They strengthen this argument by emphasising that such conversations create “a shared platform for deeper learning, meaning making, participation and engagement with the topic” (Edwards-Groves and Hardy, 2013, p. 120). Taking part in professional activities that are both critical and reflective in their interactions are an important driver of student teacher development.

Mentors strive to offer appropriate levels of support and challenge, and the student teacher needs to be receptive to these ideas, engaging with learning first with support, then becoming more independent in their actions. In Vygotsky’s

(translated 2011) early work on sociocultural theory of development, the term 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) is used in relation to child language and knowledge development. This could equally be as relevant for student teachers developing an understanding of their pedagogy under the guidance of mentorship. Vygotsky stated that the ZPD is:

[..] the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

(Hall, 2012, p. 49)

The crux of Vygotsky's thinking is that this learning potential is best developed through interaction with an adult, or more experienced other: an idea that is central to the sociocultural linguistic approach to learning adopted so naturally by many Mentors and Practice Tutors.

In considering Kemmis and Grootenboer's (2008) 'practice architectures' or the conditions and practices which co-operatively effect and anticipate people's behaviours, the roles of the people involved might be reflected upon. These architectures provide a systematic way of understanding and representing the conditions and circumstances within which social, physical, and political worlds exist. The theory of practice architectures emphasise that practices are composed of *sayings*, *doings*, and *relatings* that are interconnected within the purpose of the practice. Practice architectures illuminate the interaction between individual actions and the broader socio-cultural context.

2.5 Knowledge, skills and attributes

- *A secure knowledge of the PGCE programme and requirements for QTS*
- *Shared expectations of roles, behaviours and goals*
- *Equal participants and co-construction of student teacher identity*
- *A life-long learner with a commitment to develop self and others*
- *A good listener, effective communicator, empathetic and evaluative can support positive conversations*
- *Exercise agency, be open to new ideas, work cooperatively and willingly make improvements*
- *Provide and act on support, counsel, and direction*



When considering the varying roles and identities of participants in professional conversations, there are numerous factors impacting on the way conversations unfold. Hall (2012) argued that the language we use is not only influenced by our identity, but helps to shape our identity: “Social identity encompasses participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations and other dimensions of social personae, which are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stances” (Ochs, 1996, p. 424 as cited by Hall, 2012, p. 32). The term ‘role’ itself is heavy with expectation of a range of behaviours and actions associated with the shared understanding of the role requirements. The tacit acknowledgement that the Mentor is an accepted knowledge holder and coach, where the student teacher is a recipient of knowledge, might be considered. However, this mindset could lead to a hierarchical view of problem-solving and does not necessarily lead to an effective community of practice. This view should be treated with caution as it could lead to a power imbalance and is further compounded by the notion of ‘judgementoring’ (Hobson and Maldarez, 2013).

A Mentor might be a ‘more knowledgeable other’ in some respects, yet also a student in life-long learning themselves, honing their craft of, for example, mentorship. On the other hand, the student teacher, a mentee, is learning their skill, and is also learning with other student teachers and colleagues but is also a Mentor to the pupils they teach. The interconnectedness of effective meaning-making and learning is inextricably linked to the collaborative nature of developing a teacher identity. Hall (2012) supports this, stating that the co-construction of identity is done

through “Cooperative agents ‘individuals’ working towards a common end” (Hall, 2012, p. 38).

Sharing expectations of roles and behaviours is a key factor in establishing effective professional conversations. Connolly, Bates and Shea (2020) highlight that expectations for the first meetings and setting up purposeful professional dialogues are discussed early in the student teacher-Mentor relationship, not least for establishing the shared goals, individual roles and intended impact and outcomes, but also the practicalities of location, frequency, and duration. Aderibigbe, Gray and Colucci-Gray (2018) looked at understanding the nature of mentoring experiences between teachers and student teachers, and concur that a critical constructivist mentoring strategy that is collaborative in nature is required. Yet how that is integrated into professional conversations may need some deliberate thought and planning.

The education reforms in Wales demand that “the capacity of school staff to learn continuously and innovate to overcome challenges and support pupil learning as at the heart of the SLO model” (OECD, 2021, p. 8). Therefore, building student teacher skills to engage in professional conversations that facilitate this process is not only a desirable skill, but a necessary attribute. Student teachers also need to be responsible to develop themselves, and understand their role as an equal participant in professional conversations. But, what of the skills of Mentors? Mentors need to be good listeners, effective communicators, have a measure of empathy, demonstrate evaluative thinking and be value driven to achieve the best for both themselves and their student teachers. The OECD (2021) argue that evaluative thinking is a foundation for continuous development and should be “a process that leads to change in teachers’ knowledge bases, beliefs and practice or capacity for practice” (OECD, 2021, p. 5).

Mentors can be less-experienced staff members with new ideas about how to approach a certain activity or experienced professionals with many years of expertise. It relies on the knowledge, skill and expertise required for the specific task in question. Mentors do not have to be complete experts; they simply need to work cooperatively on a task, while providing support, counsel, and direction. To support the development of their student teachers in line with their PGCE guidelines, it is extremely useful if the Mentor has undertaken the university’s Mentor training and has a secure knowledge of the requirements for QTS. A good Mentor “uses the QTS standards to encourage a holistic and personal approach to becoming a teacher” (Estyn, 2018, p. 23).

This emphasises the value of Mentors, who not only assist developing teachers, but also raise the standard of education by encouraging excellence and professionalism in the teaching field. To form the future generation of teachers, Mentors' secure understanding of the QTS and university programme requirements is crucial.

2.6 Planning professional conversations

- *Schedule regular Mentor meetings*
- *Reach beyond individual mentoring conversations*
- *Choose from a range of face-to-face, online, and synchronous and asynchronous methods of communication*
- *Start from the current position, identify strengths and developments*
- *Enable deeper reflections through probing questioning*
- *Guide purposeful changes through incremental steps*



The scheduled Mentor meeting for student teachers is a valuable opportunity to focus on the collaboratively developing pedagogy and application. The protection of this time is important for student teachers to make steady progress, with “repeated experiences” during regular conversations with those more experienced being critical (Hall, 2012, p. 56). Mentoring sessions provide recurring support as students engage with new concepts and as Mentors demand increasingly deeper reflections through probing questioning, they can determine the level of progress the student teacher is making and guide them to make purposeful changes to practice in incremental steps.

Professional conversations are part of everyday practice for teaching professionals across the school community, as part of informal and formal interactions beyond individual mentoring meetings. They could take place in staff meetings, staffrooms, corridors, working parties, student teacher focus groups or even the playground on break duty. As Jones, Tones and Foulkes (2019) highlight:

[..] successful mentoring is not realised through an isolated weekly lesson observation of the ATs' [Associate Teacher]² teaching. It is an immersive process where the AT and the Mentor face the ongoing challenge of exploring aspects of pedagogy and developing a relationship that is conducive to shared learning.
(Jones, Tones and Foulkes, 2019, p. 120)

Chien and Teo's (2022) research provides balance to this view, stating that unstructured discussion around the school "does not necessarily lead teachers to change their classroom practice or to undergo professional development" (Chien and Teo, 2022, p. 357), and that providing the time, space and clear focus for Mentors to engage with teachers, supports teachers' development and impacts directly on their practice. Forster et al. (2021) cement this view of 'ad hoc' conversations where they may lead to gaps in knowledge even though they "may feel more natural or authentic, the risk is that some statements may not be discussed at all" (Forster et al., 2021, p. 6).

In addition to the traditional mechanisms for mentoring, there is an increased use of online platforms for mentoring practices. This has been compounded not only by the Covid-19 Pandemic, and widespread technological advances of online meeting spaces, but also the incorporation of new digital technologies for capturing lessons and having asynchronous professional conversations via a time-stamped commentary box. Timperley (2023) highlights that the pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to virtual platforms, and educators adapted by engaging in meaningful dialogues online with reported benefits in these conversations supporting "knowledge exchange, collaborative problem-solving, and reflective practice" (Timperley, 2023, p. 58).

² Associate Teacher is an equivalent to the Open University's Student Teacher.

2.7 The content of professional conversations

- *Consider macro-themes; global, national, regional contexts, and school priorities*
- *Begin with personal student teacher need*
- *Provide opportunities to debate, examine, observe, and dissect key skills*
- *Reflect on aspects of practice, academic research, and inquiry*
- *Make links to every-day practice*



When planning the content of professional conversations, Mentors may consider macro-themes from global, national and regional contexts, in addition to school priorities and personal student teacher need. The research by Forster et al. (2021) noted how some Mentors organise their professional conversation by themes such as “behaviour management” or “motivating pupils” (Forster et al., 2021, p. 1). They advocate that student teachers should be provided with unambiguous and regular mentoring, as well as opportunities to debate, examine, observe, and dissect the key skills exercised by more experienced colleagues.

Edwards-Groves and Hardy (2013, p. 117) note the importance of reflecting on academic research and making links to every-day practice as an effective way of bringing meaningful research to an authentic context: “engaging in action research and other forms of practitioner inquiry is a powerful form of professional learning”. This approach can also help the student teacher to reflect on their university curriculum studies, Practice Learning Activities³, and small-scale research projects, thereby linking theory with practice.

³ [Practice Learning Activities](#) – these tasks are a compulsory element of the PGCE programme.

2.8 Conducting professional conversations

- *Value insight and equity*
- *Model language, opinions, and inquiry of real-world examples*
- *Ask questions to support self-reflection and increase 'wait time'*
- *Use greatest challenges as a starting point*
- *Draw on support from knowledgeable colleagues*
- *Use protocols and coaching techniques*
- *Use dialogic tools and extended turns to talk and sustain thinking*
- *Transform discourse into future action*



Not only is the content of a professional dialogue important, the manner in which it is approached arguably has a greater impact on the development of the student teacher. Jones, Tones and Foulkes (2019) clarify the basis for developing a safe space for professional discussion being built through a relationship of mutual trust and understanding and that “open dialogue seemingly emerges as the Mentor and AT [Associate Teacher] develop a trusting and non-threatening reciprocal relationship” (Jones, Tones and Foulkes, 2019, p. 129). As the openness develops, student teachers are exposed to a safe space to critically analyse, test, and debate pedagogical theories without fear or recrimination. Waters (2020) argues that this is precisely the type of learner needed:

We would encourage them to question, debate, argue and challenge by engaging them in discourse, introducing them to wider professional experiences and wise professionals with experience to share. We should connect them with research, reading and ideas and value their insight. (Waters, 2020, p. 7)

In addition to interactions of discussion, praise, instruction and analysis, some advocate the use of repetitive features: “The more frequent and reliable the uses of particular patterns and structures are in the unfolding actions of the activities, the more likely they will be stored and remembered” (Hall, 2012, p. 56). This could apply to school-based terminology that promotes reflection on strengths and areas for development such as ‘What Went Well’ and ‘Even Better If’ (WWW/EBI). This also reinforces that Mentors might consider modelling the expected pedagogical terms and language akin to learning, self-reflection and critical analysis.

According to Forster et al. (2021), it is interesting to reflect on how the students see successful professional dialogues and value the opportunity to share their opinions

about how they assess their own work. Many students also commented that exchanging ideas and real-world examples, as well as having the opportunity to ask questions is beneficial. Their research found that identifying the aspects of practice that present the greatest challenges as a starting point is helpful, and that personalised guidance can be well received. The sharing of relevant training materials, connections to specialised literature, and opportunities for additional discussion with knowledgeable colleagues inside the school were particularly valued.

Edwards-Groves and Hardy (2013) discuss the significance of professional conversations' potential to develop future practice: "Critical reflexive dialogues are focused professional learning conversations which do not simply reflect back on past practices but endeavour to transform the discourse and conditions for practices into the future" (Edwards-Groves and Hardy, 2013, p. 120). This view offers value to the notion of feedback for improvement leading to a change in student teacher practice.

In considering the importance of *how* professional conversations develop, others illuminate the usefulness of using protocols to facilitate a meaningful exchange. For instance, Chien and Teo (2022) draw on three features, namely "inquiry habit of mind", "using relevant data" and "relationship of respect and change" via a variety of coaching techniques for different scenarios to facilitate fruitful dialogues (Chien and Teo, 2022, p. 360). Pupil work, instructional strategies, or an article discussion could be a focus for these. They argue that protocols increase inquiry, advance equity, maintain focus, and generate ideas within a controlled time limit.

In addition, using retrieval practices, similar to those used with pupils in the classroom, can typically encourage students to provide a deeper more reflective response. As Edwards-Groves and Hardy (2013) noted that an increased number of dialogic tools such as "providing students with more extended turns to talk so that they can sustain their thinking and deepen their reasoning" (Edwards-Groves and Hardy, 2013, p. 127), similarly an increase in 'wait time' offers students enough time and space to respond when they are comfortable. The crux of the matter: questioning and dialogic discussions, both of which are socially interactive in their nature, and depend on the type of relationship that underpins these activities.

Alexander (2008) emphasises the value of questioning, rather than recitation or 'pseudo questioning', in order to help learners develop their knowledge with the support of a 'more knowledgeable other'. This is a crucial component of Vygotsky's (2011) Zone of Proximal Development and is a key feature of communicative

competence. An illustration of this is the teacher's supporting role in assisting the learners to become more independent by providing questions and scaffolding.

"At the heart of [this] dialogic teaching approach to teaching are questions that illicit students' thoughts, reasons, experiences, and opinions" (McNeil, 2011, p. 396). McNeil reminds us of a range of referential questions (questions that illicit opinion, evaluation, or analysis) that can support student teacher thinking, such as questions where we rephrase, simplify, allot wait time, use gesture and mime, engage recruitment, repeat, decompose, probe, or deliver slowly. When questioning student teachers, it might also be prudent to remember sociocultural influences and language as an indicator of thought process as "questions are never neutral and are powerful means of calling on members' cultural repertoires of ways of speaking" (Baker and Johnson, 1998, p. 230).

Dialogic conversations should be able to provide "intellectual and social differentiation" (Alexander, 2008, p. 82), but as with any innovation, it can take some time for a shift in practice to become embedded into routine pedagogy and to make an impact on the student teacher's practice.

2.9 The impact of professional conversations

- *Emphasise the learning and wellness of students*
- *Identify how pupils can make progress*
- *Focus on how pupils are responding to changes*
- *Think about 'real' scenarios and address own misconceptions*
- *Challenge each other and invoke critical thinking*
- *Respect all participants and value collegial wisdom to expand expertise*



Many have reported positively on the impact of collaborative professional learning. For instance, this is reflected in a review for the Teacher Development Trust into effective professional learning programmes that highlighted that:

[..] access to some form of collegial support for solving important problems was essential, along with input from an expert leader, establishing common goals and new approaches for achieving them, and with joint effort focussed on learning of pupils with similar needs. (Cordingley et al., 2015, p.7)

Forster et al. (2021) notably share an important impact, in that students have a better understanding of scaffolding and in identifying how pupils can make progress. The 'gap' between theory and practice, which is recognised as a concern in early teacher education, is addressed by providing students with an opportunity to think about 'real' rather than hypothetical scenarios. In addition to this, professional conversations invoke critical thinking, and enable participants to address their own misconceptions. In terms of cementing a positive relationship, professional conversations can promote a collaborative and equitable approach as "all respecting and valuing collegial wisdom" (Edwards-Groves and Hardy, 2013, p. 124).

If a professional conversation is considered as a mini-inquiry, it is clear to see how they may impact positively on student teachers' learning. According to the OECD (2021) good research places a strong emphasis on the learning and wellness of students. One line of inquiry that could be pursued is causal reasoning, and it should be collaborative, structured, highly evaluative, and given enough time. The OECD (2021) speaks of 'iterative spirals' in which educators test, observe, and adjust as a productive way to expand their professional expertise.

2.10 Challenges of professional conversations

- *Apparent lack of time and multiple items to discuss during Mentor meetings; lesson observation, feedback, and planning*
- *Distancing strategies, interruptions, negative bodily dispositions*
- *Hyper-questioning, overreliance, or ineffective use of protocols*
- *Restricted interaction, themes, depth, and curiosity*
- *Assessment in lieu of dialogue and development*



In engaging in professional conversations, Mentors should be aware of the potential pitfalls that they may encounter so that with forward planning, these can be limited or even avoided. Forster et al. (2021) refer to the most significant challenges as an apparent lack of time available for such discussions and having multiple other items to discuss within the Mentor time, for example lesson observation, feedback, and planning. Hall (2012) highlights that unsuccessful interactions can be hampered by distancing strategies such as interruptions or negative bodily dispositions such as a travelling gaze, impatient tapping, or wandering focus. They also warn of ‘hyper-questioning’, when questions are asked repeatedly throughout a turn, there is little chance for a response from the students, and when questions are asked frequently during a turn, learners can become disengaged.

Some Mentors can rely on supportive frameworks or protocols to plan professional conversations, and Chien and Teo (2022) warn of the overreliance or ineffective use of protocols leading to a lack of interaction, narrowing of themes, constricted depth of examination, an absence of turn taking, and restricted curiosity: “teachers relying too much on protocols leads to poor interactions” and “teachers are constrained by the procedures of the protocols, which limit further probing” (Chien and Teo, 2022, p. 4).

Alexander (2008) argues that there might only be a few seconds to decide on questions to ask and which scaffolds to use during a dialogue. If a Mentor misses an opportunity to capitalise on a dialogic conversation, the arguments may break down or a train of thought may not develop. The differences between dialogic and extended speaking, as well as how collaborative discourse develops, must be clearly understood.

2.11 Planning for improvement

- *Promote a culture and organisational practice that enables teachers to collaborate*
- *Place student teachers in Mentors' classes*
- *Schedule meeting and preparation time*
- *Deconstruct approaches, discuss theory and apply to practice*
- *Work closely with individual Mentors to deepen knowledge*
- *Research further strategies on language use and question forming*



Being mindful of challenges to overcome when engaging in professional conversations is not the only tool in securing a positive outcome; planning for improvement should be part of everyday practice. Forster et al. (2021) suggest scheduling meeting time into a student teacher's schedule because Mentors require time to prepare for the meetings. This is a sensible logistical approach. For everyday assistance and engagement, student teachers should ideally be placed in their Mentors' classes to encourage more casual professional conversations. Student teachers should be able to observe skilled teachers and "deconstruct the approach as well as discuss and analyse with expert colleagues" (Forster et al., 2021, p. 7). They also emphasise how Mentors can apply and discuss theory, gain a deeper understanding of the core curriculum offered by the ITE provider, and connect discussion topics to assignments that are allocated to the classroom.

The responsibility for improvement planning also falls to leadership teams to ensure the correct culture and environment facilitate lifelong professional learning. As Edwards-Groves and Hardy (2013) argue:

*[..] in order to make dialogic development possible, schools as professional communities need to change organisational practices to provide communicative spaces for teachers to be able to learn from one another and work together in more genuine professional learning partnerships than is typically the case.
(Edwards-Groves and Hardy, 2013, p. 134)*

For schools to be able to create the effective, communicative communities, they will inevitably need support from their ITE providers and as Jones, Tones and Foulkes (2019) note "ITE providers should work more closely with individual Mentors rather than only providing generic group training" (p. 131).

2.12 Summary

- Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate.
- “It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it.”
- “It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.”



The literature highlights how effective professional conversations are multifaceted. Each participant enters into the exchange with unique skills, knowledge and understanding and they are influenced by sociocultural factors, the context and environment. For successful conversations to take place, they should be well planned in terms of time, space and content, and an equal amount of consideration should be given to the way they are conducted and the style of the conversation and questioning that takes place. A positive impact would be a favourable improvement in thinking, practice and consequently the provision the pupils' experience.

One aspect mentioned less frequently in the literature was around the student teachers who fail to initially verbally engage in discussion, maybe through introversion, illness, relationship issues, stress, or even taking longer to process information. The apparent lack of interaction could indicate that cognitive activity is not taking place, however it could also be happening and could result in future improvement. Further research into this area might prove illuminating.

One theme that appeared to resonate for many was the need for effective collaboration and positive relationships in all aspects of professional conversations, from the initiation stages, planning, conducting, evaluating and making changes to practice. Collaboration, relationship building, and co-construction take time, and Mentors need this to facilitate effective outcomes. A second recurring theme was the **way** that conversations are conducted is more important than **what** is said.

A key purpose of the professional conversations is to invoke critical thinking, promote student-teacher empowerment and autonomy; It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it! Or more melodiously, in the words of the 1980's pop song “It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.... and that's what gets results” (Fun Boy Three and Bananarama, 1982).

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ <i>Qualitative approach</i>➤ <i>Research conversations and reflections</i>➤ <i>10 participants</i>➤ <i>Thematic analysis</i>	

In December 2023 the project advertised for Practice Tutors from The Open University Partnership to contribute to this qualitative research study. Altogether 10 volunteered; initially seven Practice Tutors took part in either a focus group discussion or individual interview. After the initial discussions, Mentors, student teachers and School Coordinators were invited to contribute written reflections of their experiences of the professional conversations that take place during review meetings; three were submitted, two from student teachers and one from a Mentor. Six participants were teaching in primary, one in an all-age (3-16) and three in secondary schools across Wales. All participants received a thank you voucher as an appreciation of their time. The [Appendix](#) contains the discussion/interview questions.

The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee gave its approval for this project (HREC: 0134). All participants received an information sheet before participating in a discussion/interview or submitting their reflection.

Manual thematic analysis and qualitative data analysis software used inductive and deductive approaches (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). The stages of analysis involved: data familiarisation, agreement of initial themes and incorporation of emerging themes. Each participant’s data was allocated an individual identifier (e.g. P1, P2); these are used for all direct quotes included in this report.

The following sections include the discussion of findings that helps to offer insight into how professional conversations are understood and experienced by those involved (Section 4), and the conclusions and recommendations that emerged from this research (Section 5).

4. Discussion of findings

This section is informed by the interview and discussion data, along with the written reflections.

4.1 Defining professional conversations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ <i>There is no single definition of 'professional conversation'</i>➤ <i>Professional conversations are enabled by good relationship building</i>➤ <i>Professionals who lead conversations with others become more adept at this over time, developing more nuanced approaches</i>	

Participants did not have a single **definition of a professional conversation** to draw on or make use of in their role. Instead, the biggest area of common agreement was that a professional conversation should be based on practice and should primarily focus on practice evidence, “professionals draw(ing) in different evidence” (P5). Participants commented on the need to explain and give “valid and justified rationale behind (your) reasons” (P3) when discussing with student teachers and highlighted the need to relate discussions back to the Professional Standards. Other participants commented on the need for “clear aims and purposes” (P7). These definitions mirror many of Alexander’s (2008) observations of a systematic and organised process.

There was a contrast between participants feeling they needed to keep conversations ‘professional’ (“you do not allow your personal viewpoint or emotions (to get) involved” (P3)) and the strong sense that the most effective dialogues took place when there was a two-way reflective dialogue which came out of a collaborative relationship; “a sort of reflective space where it's a two way dialogue - the student is reflecting with you and [...] working together” (P7). This reflects Jones, Tones and Foulkes’ (2019) focus on mutual respect and understanding being central to effective conversations. In this sense, the professional outcomes, which could be seen as hard outputs, were enhanced by personal relationships (soft inputs), and were summarised well by one participant: “professional doesn’t mean that it can’t be done in an empathetic and supportive way” (P1).

Participants focused on the **expectations of students**. Practice Tutors described effective professional conversations were those where students were ‘open to learning’ – and defined this in terms of being organised and prepared for the

professional conversation, working with the Practice Tutor or Mentor to co-construct targets or suggest improvements, were active within the discussion by asking questions or trying to solve the problems themselves:

I feel like they've definitely got to take that active role for me within a (Practice Tutor) meeting. Are they able to explain things they're doing in the practice and the classroom? Are they able to talk about their practice? Are they able to talk about their research project?
(P7)

This importance of the student taking a proactive role in preparing and shaping the professional conversation was identified as a gap within the literature review (see Section 2.3). Other positive aspects of student behaviours were also identified, for instance, student teachers being able to communicate about their practice with their Practice Tutor and Mentor to identify what impacted their development. This was also evident in Forster et al's (2021) study and is apparent here:

It's the same thing. It's always going back to that impact, isn't it? But that's what we're saying. I think the professional discussion, at the end, that person can go away and it has an impact on their practice and it makes a change. (P1)

Practice Tutors were able to reflect on the way that their approach to professional conversation had **developed** and matured over time – both as a result of becoming more experienced but also because the Practice Tutor had got to know their student teacher better. Participants commented on feeling less nervous and more confident leading professional conversations:

I used to prepare all my questions and everything that I wanted to say and I used to want it to have a real sort of structure and I would lead it. Whereas now, I think I have some questions as a guide but if we go off, it goes off in a different direction and I'll just go with the flow. (P2)

In this way they felt professional conversations had become more two-way, more research informed and adapted to the needs of the individual student teacher (Edward-Groves and Hardy, 2013).

Participants also reflected on the way that professional conversations with student teachers were **different** to professional conversations with colleagues. This reflected Nsibandé's conclusion (2007) that professional dialogue can be used as an enabler of professional learning across a teacher's career.

[..] they're both supportive, but I think, the one with the student teacher is different because you're trying to push them forward and make sure that they're making the progress that they need. You know to pass their course and you're identifying targets for them and saying; these are your targets and this is how we're going to use these. These are some suggestions for how you're going to achieve them. Whereas I guess if I was talking to somebody else in my department or one of my peers here, you wouldn't necessarily be suggesting targets. I mean, if they wanted to have them, you know, advice you could give it to them, but that wouldn't be the purpose of the meeting. It would be more reflective, I guess. (P2)

4.2 Important elements of a professional conversation

- *Sufficient time*
- *Active reflection on practice*
- *Collaborative target setting*
- *Personalised targets*
- *Effective questioning*
- *Interactive in nature*
- *Refer to appropriate documentation*
- *Focus on strengths*
- *Build on positive relationships*



“Sufficient time” has been highlighted as one of the triad of success factors required for effective mentoring (Glover et al., 2023a). Almost all interviewees reported that it was important to have appropriate **preparation time** before engaging in a professional conversation. One participant exemplified the way this prepares the ground for reflective activities: “I always make sure that I check their reflections and their PLPs prior to meetings just to check they are taking place” (P7). This is useful to ensure documentation is being correctly completed, and it offers the opportunity to plan follow-up questions. Another participant stressed that preparation time was important to be able to gather thoughts and facts:

Access the students' SharePoint to have a little look at what's been going on in terms of their planning, their reflections and their feedback from their Mentors. Having a little insight into their teaching, so looking at a lesson that they've recorded, or a lesson

clip and just seeing how your feedback or your observations collate with those of their Mentor. (P2)

Another participant noted: “without that kind of planning and having that understanding of where the student is in their journey, it's difficult to have an effective meeting” (P6), and this chimes with the views of Forster et al. (2021) that effective planning of professional conversations is somewhat hampered by an ‘apparent lack of time’. Others highlighted the importance of setting up meetings in good time, referring to previous reports, reflecting on recorded lessons, and compiling initial questions ahead of time, and the “tone of the professional learning review was purposeful” (P9).

A wealth of research (e.g. Alexander, 2008; Estyn, 2018; Furlong, 2016; Lofthouse, 2018; OECD, 2021; Zuengler and Miller, 2006; Waters, 2020; Welsh Government, 2019b) emphasises the **importance of reflection** for student teachers to improve practice. Participants also responded that they supported reflection is a key aspect of an effective professional conversation: “so they can understand how their reflections can have an impact on practice” (P7). This is essential as it enables student teachers to reflect critically on their experiences in the classroom, pinpoint their strengths, and obtain a deeper understanding of their pedagogical practice. One participant explained: “I bring up the reflections (IRIS video clip) and do a model reflection with them” (P7). Scaffolding thinking supports student teachers to articulate their own ideas, and this can be done by supported questioning, as one participant commented:

I might open with ‘can you reflect on two positives and two ways to develop from the lesson?’ If I feel like the reflection isn't as good as it could be, then they're at least reflecting with me in that professional dialogue, rather not reflecting at all. (P7)

It was agreed by many participants that the student teacher should be an **active agent** in reflecting on their practice: “I also think it's really important to get the student to identify where they need to develop and what their targets should be” (P2). Another highlighted the need for reflections to be personalised to their context: “I try to encourage them to think about all the different ways that would work for them” (P1); with another commenting on always giving the student teacher “the opportunity to share their own thoughts and feelings” (P10). This reflects Edwards-Groves and Hardy's findings (2013) that student teachers need to engage critically on their own past practices with a view to transforming future practice. By valuing

self- and supported-reflection, Mentors and Practice Tutors set the environment for a more effective and impactful conversation to collaboratively set targets for improvement.

Half of the interviewees noted that **collaborative target-setting** was a key element of a professional conversation, and this reflects Zuengler and Miller's (2006) view that progress is best made when Mentors are not "imposing solutions from outside" (Zuengler and Miller, 2006, p. 295). This involves working together with the student teacher to establish clear, achievable goals that are aligned with the Professional Standards required for Qualified Teacher Status. Collaborative target-setting ensures that the goals are realistic and tailored to the individual's needs, promoting a sense of ownership and motivation. One interviewee noted that student teachers "need to be fully involved in the conversation to know their targets and their ways forward, which encourages them to evaluate and think about their next steps" (P7). Working together in this way fosters a sense of partnership and mutual respect, as both parties contribute to setting the targets. This was also expanded upon further: "The students can build on the things that I'm saying. Quite often we'll come up with their targets through the sort of reflection questions I have. It's always nice to see, are they wanting to change the same things I am?" (P7). A collaborative approach to target setting not only enhances accountability, but it also encourages ongoing dialogue and feedback, and builds a stronger relationship with everyone involved. One also commented that there could be "some opportunity to follow up on targets being set" (P8).

Ensuring the **targets are personalised** and relevant is also a key factor, with one participant reporting that "all students develop at a different rate, and I've got to be respectful and mindful of that" (P7). For example, another commented on the "different level of experience they have when they come in" (P1), with some having worked as Higher Level Teaching Assistants for many years whereas others have "minimal classroom experience" (P1). One Practice Tutor demonstrated the facilitatory role they play in collaborative target-setting: "I involve the student and the Mentor with the target-setting and let them lead that process" (P2). This is a view advocated by Estyn (2018) and OECD (2021). Another participant reported the need for careful collaborative target-setting that builds on areas that students are already working on to avoid over burdening:

I've tried to be helpful to try and align those targets to things that the students are working on, or have already been given as targets within the school and I am really conscious not to add different things. (P1)

Another commented on linking targets to research, and involving more experienced colleagues:

I tend to identify ways to support their development, so if I do say where X is your target, I think where you could support yourself by doing this, whether that's linked to their professional research and reading new articles, books or journals, whether that's going around the school and observing practice and observing qualified teachers in different settings. (P7)

Focusing on **effective questioning** and appropriate challenge to provide deeper thinking were also dominant themes. One participant stated that: “before I do my lesson observation feedback, I tend to have sent questions to the student” (P7), and another reported on using prompt questions, but not being bound by such questions. This corresponds with the findings of Waters (2020) in using questions and debate to “challenge by engaging them in discourse” (Waters, 2020. p. 7), and McNeil’s (2011) findings on the broad range of questions that can probe and illicit critical analysis.

Another participant indicated the use of questions to “validate the judgements” and also to “identify those kinds of questions that you can use to really draw out the understanding of some of those key concepts in the teaching standards” (P1). It was also noted that effective use of questions could present different perspectives, challenge understanding of relevant research to support practice and identify developments that would lead to a change in practice.

Additionally, a few participants noted several other important elements of professional conversations:

- Clearly communicate aims and be well-organised
- Contextualised, holistic and interactive in nature
- Refer to relevant documentation and IRIS reflections
- Underpinned with appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding
- Focus on strengths and develop a growth mindset through coaching and mentoring
- Build on positive relationships

These important elements of a professional conversation are not exhaustive, are context applicable and are to be considered carefully when preparing for a professional conversation as part of a review meeting.

4.3 Preparing for the review meeting

- Use all documentation
- Build on positive relationships
- Be prepared to be patient and empathetic
- Maintain contact between meetings
- Review video recordings (IRIS Connect)
- Communicate expectations in advance



As noted previously (Section 4.1), there appears to be a dichotomy between the process driven document collection aspect of a review meeting, which is contrasted with a softer skill development aspect. Reference to the need to make use of previously generated **documentation** to support a professional conversation was commented upon by the majority of participants. This could be lesson plans, resources, Mentor observations, feedback notes and progress with the professional standards on the Professional Learning Platform. This has also been highlighted by Chien and Teo, who advocate ‘using relevant data’ to support reflective dialogues (Chien and Teo, 2022).

One participant noted how they use documentation to uncover broader aspects of the student teacher’s progress: “When we do the practice review forms, it’s really to make sure the sections A and B are completed, but it gives you a much broader picture of the progress that the student’s making” (P3). Another commented on how they used the documentation to assess how well new curriculum developments and national reform strategies were being addressed:

I like to see quite a full lesson plan, where they’ve got links to new curriculum, the detail in their pedagogical aspects, and the key questions. Have they got their Welsh included. So, I like to see that they’re thinking about all different aspects prior to their lesson. (P7)

Estyn (2018) highlighted that student teachers’ achievement should reflect the outcomes of lesson observations, work scrutiny, lesson planning and formal assignments. One participant noted how they facilitate this in their setting:

I observed the student a few weeks ago and [they] sent me this great project. [They’d] marked it, but [they’d] put this in the lesson plan - our pupils have time to reflect on their learning. But there were no purple pen or comments underneath the teacher’s marking. So, by them sending me their end products, I could pick up on that, and see how our learners responded to the feedback, but if I hadn’t seen the end-product, I wouldn’t have been able to do that. It was

lovely then, even though I wasn't able to see how they responded to the end-product on film, [the student teacher] was able to explain well at the end of the week when we have feedback sessions, that was really good. (P7)

This highlights how an effective professional conversation lasts longer than the dialogue itself and provides a contextualised opportunity for follow-up, reflection and evaluation. Another commented on how they use the documentation to form a holistic view of the student teacher's development:

When I get students at the beginning of the year, I encourage them to share their teaching file with me, and I have a good look through that just to see the types of activities and the practice learning activities that they've been involved with, and have a look at the types of lessons that they've been teaching to make sure that they've had a broad range of experiences. (P4)

Fact-based discussions ensure that they are based on contextualised reality and supported by evidence. This approach shows a dedication to honesty and integrity, which builds confidence, trust and underpins principles of a positive relationship.

Some interviewees commented on the **building of a relationship** being a key factor in preparing for an effective professional conversation which resonates with other research (Chien and Teo, 2022; Glover et al., 2023b; Jones, Tones and Foulkes, 2019). Some participants shared how they invested in this before meeting their student teachers through email, and others explained how they approached their first meetings to nurture a positive working partnership, demonstrating patience and empathy in those first few interactions, which can pave the way for a strong bond:

That first meeting now is to get to know them and to give them that confidence in you in your role. But the way you communicate your expectations; it is critical to give them that kind of security, especially for those who are very conscientious. (P6)

Also of interest was the way in which some participants commented that they created a friendly atmosphere to conduct their conversations; this is illustrated in the following quote. Reinforcing the human element in the busy environment of school-life can be a welcome approach for beginning teachers.

So, in terms of opening the meeting with a student, it was opened with like a general chat. How are you? How are you finding the placement? all that sort of stuff, just to have that informal chat with the students before I go into the formal stuff. If I know one or two things about the student as well, I'll have a little chat about them and how they're doing and what's happened in their life and so on.
(P7)

To ensure relationships are maintained, one interviewee shared how they would maintain an online connection with regular contact to maintain open lines of communication: "So I try not to be a total stranger to them, from visit to visit" (P5). This positive feature was noted by others; developing "open dialogue seemingly emerges as the Mentor and AT [Associate Teacher] develop a trusting and non-threatening reciprocal relationship" (Jones, Tones and Foulkes, 2019 p. 129). However, one interviewee noted the challenges of an online training programme, and that they make use of every opportunity to build a positive relationship:

I use that opportunity when looking through the practice teaching file just to try and familiarise myself with them a little bit because it is quite difficult as it's all virtual. You never meet these people in real life. I generally try to familiarise myself with them as much as I can.
(P4)

One of the most effective ways of online familiarisation is completed by reviewing documentation and observing the student teacher using video technology. Viewing the video recorded lesson using IRIS Connect was noted as key preparation for a review meeting by a number of interviewees, thus reinforcing the need to be informed, fact based and to have a current picture of where the student teacher is currently operating. One participant commented that viewing these recordings offered:

An opportunity to get a bit of an insight into the practice that's going on within the classroom. It's an opportunity to look at the forms that have been completed by the subject Mentor and by the School Coordinator to get a bit of an insight into where the student is. (P3)

According to Nisbande (2007) professional conversations, such as post-lesson-observation discussions, act as a platform for collaborative knowledge development and evaluation. This view was reinforced by another participant and demonstrated how the documentation supports a purposeful dialogue:

So before the professional conversation, I watch the clips which they send me. Before I have that feedback conversation with the students, I always read their lesson plans to check their lesson plans are looking good. Where can they improve their lesson planning? What is going to have an impact on their practice? (P7)

Another highlighted how lesson observation helps to contextualise discussion:

I always ask the students to provide their lesson resources, their lesson plan and their reflections, because it's quite difficult to sometimes just watch a lesson without any context. So, you know, how long have they been teaching the class? What have this class done before? What they're going to do this lesson and after? What the scheme of learning is? To try and build as wide a picture as possible, really. (P2)

This view was validated by another participant who commented on observing the lesson before the meeting along with requesting an additional lesson to observe that their Mentor has also seen: "I personally find having the school or class mentor's observation notes really beneficial to me" (P4). Additionally, participants highlighted a few other important factors they find important when preparing for a review meeting:

- Expectations and dates communicated in advance
- Professional conversations set as part of an ongoing dialogue
- Self-reflection reveals next steps for development

4.4 Skills, knowledge and attributes

- *A range of practical skills are required – including organisation, communication and analysis*
- *Attributes such as being supportive, assertive, attentive and open are key to effective professional conversations*
- *Enabling student teachers to self-evaluate through effective questioning, supporting and challenging will encourage autonomy*
- *Being open to learning through sharing experiences*
- *Different types of knowledge are required – including knowledge of the programme expectations, the student teacher's context and their progress towards QTS*



Participants were given an open opportunity to highlight the skills required to ensure effective professional conversations. The responses demonstrated the wide range of skills that individuals recognised as being key to success when undertaking a professional conversation. Unlike the previous section no particular themes were repeatedly mentioned by a majority of participants.

Referring to the need for **knowledge** about expectations for the school experience was most prominent in responses. This knowledge took several forms: knowledge of programme requirements, knowledge of the contexts in which students were working, and knowledge of the professional standards that student teachers are working towards. For example, one participant felt it was important to have an understanding as to whether the student is following the salaried or part-time route (P3) in order to support them appropriately through the conversation.

Another participant recognised the importance of having up-to-date knowledge of classroom practices and across phases, to be able to understand the skillset that student teachers are building in relation to the age and subjects they teach. Practical teaching knowledge is also important, particularly if your role is external to the school in which the student is working. As one participant mentions, speaking with someone outside your “school bubble” (P7) can be useful to identify alternative approaches to teaching and learning, therefore widening students’ repertoire of different techniques to make them more “well-rounded practitioners” (P7). These comments resonate with Alexander’s (2008) recognition that More Knowledgeable Others (Practice Tutors or Mentors) support learners (student teachers) to develop their knowledge.

Participants recognised the importance of being **supportive** to student teachers during professional conversations in order to encourage their development. As a starting point, one participant suggested that their role is to encourage student teachers to reach their potential: “I always reiterate that with my students, I want you to succeed” (P7). Several participants recognised that professional conversations should involve nurturing individuals, and to do this effectively, they suggested several desirable skills and attributes.

Initially, participants considered it important to **listen carefully**. One practitioner explained that it is important to have the skill of “really listening carefully, but also being quite skilled at that to be able to pull out key points from what the students say” (P1), so that they can remain focused on the purpose of the conversation – the “communicative space for deeper learning, meaning making, participation and engagement” referred to by Edwards-Groves and Hardy (2013, p. 120).

Focusing on students’ progress against the standards was also seen as a supportive skill, ensuring students’ awareness of the expectations through the use of standard-specific language during conversations. Encouraging student teachers’ use of the professional standards, and recognising their progress towards them, is also identified as an important skill for Practice Tutors and Mentors. In fact, another skill identified by several participants is the ability to draw reflections from student teachers that meaningfully support their progress. As one participant stated:

I want it to come from them rather than me telling them what they need to do, or what they should be doing, or what they shouldn't be doing. Trying to get them to identify themselves and then you can say, well this is 'how we can support you', and then you can suggest strategies or things that they could do, to ensure that they're meeting those targets or making the progress. (P2)

Adopting this approach supports the student teacher to become more autonomous in reflecting on their own progress, and is recognised by Estyn (2018) as effective practice.

Being supportive can also involve **challenge**, as mentioned by several participants, suggesting the importance of being able to **ask effective questions** that encourage student teachers to unpick practice in order to reflect and identify ways forward. For one participant, the skill in this situation is to “try not to give the answer” (P2), but to draw these from the individual, recognising that, on some occasions, a level of “bluntness” (P1) will need to be adopted to get to this position. As Timperley (2023,

p. 58) suggests, this approach encourages “knowledge exchange, collaborative problem-solving and reflective practice”.

Participants also highlighted a set of practical skills that are required for effective professional conversations. When preparing ahead of a practice review, **analytical skills** are useful in identifying areas of strength and further development from the evidence provided by a student teacher. An ability to synthesise information from a range of sources in order to gain a holistic view of a student teacher’s progress is also required. To do this in a timely manner requires high levels of **organisation**. Participants highlighted the importance of high-quality **communication** skills in professional conversations, recognising the complex ways in which they are applied to move the dialogue along in a positive manner. Effective communication in sensitive situations is extremely important, as maintaining an open dialogue where the student teacher, the Mentor and the Practice Tutor are able to contribute appropriately is key to a positive professional conversation. As one participant suggested: “There’s a real delicacy about how you have to go about drawing out some of the improvements that you feel necessary from the evidence” (P6).

The importance of being **open** during professional conversations was also identified. As one practitioner commented: “I think you need to be an experienced teacher and to be able to share your experiences, not necessarily your expertise, but to share your experiences” (P4). Having a **willingness to be open** with student teachers in an encouraging manner can draw on personal experiences to support progress. This openness can work both ways, as noticed by another: “I also think you yourself being open to learning because I’ve learned a lot from doing this process” (P4). This recognition of the ability of student teachers to contribute something meaningful to a more experienced practitioner’s pedagogy is another attribute that prompts effective professional conversations, and resonates with Nsibandé’s (2007) promotion of platforms that encourage collaborative knowledge construction and reflection.

4.5 Suggestions to improve professional conversations

- *Practice Tutors to improve own knowledge e.g. professional standards*
- *Always have high levels of professionalism*
- *Ensure positive, honest and fair two-way conversations*
- *Develop listening and questioning skills*
- *Include overarching targets along with specific ones*
- *Consider student teachers' well-being*



Participants proposed a series of suggestions that could improve professional conversations. The following presents the key aspects reported, which are applicable for the frequent professional conversations between Mentors and student teachers, and during practice review meetings. Suggestions focused on **developing specific skills** and improving Practice Tutors' own knowledge and understanding of particular elements such as the professional standards. Estyn (2018) also point out that effective mentoring requires the application of the professional standards to ensure the development of a holistic teacher.

It was generally agreed that it is important for Mentors and Practice Tutors to instil professionalism in the quality of the feedback during professional conversations. This aspect along with **advocating for a collaborative approach** that engages student teachers in reflection has been emphasised as important by others too (Edward-Groves and Hardy, 2013; Jones et al., 2021). Participants also proposed that the conversations need to be two-way, with it made clear to student teachers that they can 'try new things', and it is okay to make mistakes. It is also important for Mentors to be empathetic, and remember what it is like to be a student teacher, so that conversations are 'positive', 'honest' and 'fair'.

In line with the literature (Alexander, 2008; MacNeill, 2011), **good listening and questioning skills** were also suggested to be critical in underpinning conversations. It was suggested that approaches will need to be adapted to suit the student teachers concerned: "Listen, question and adapt your approach as suits" (P1); "It's having the skills to be able to be analytical of their performance, but being able to share that in the right way" (P3).

Linked to the above it was suggested that Practice Tutors need to ensure that their **student teacher's well-being** is always considered. This can have considerable

long-term implications, as habits created during their training can impact teachers' sustainability in the profession: "It has to be sustainable practice" (P6).

One Practice Tutor also commented on the limited time available for 'getting to know' the student teacher. Forster et al. (2012) had also noted the significant challenge of limited availability of time. Due to the online nature of the programme, it was suggested that Practice Tutors visiting student teachers for face-to-face conversations could be considered. It was also suggested that it is important to get to know the student teachers as a whole – not just their teaching. For example, what other areas they want to develop professionally, and to encourage reflections along these lines too. For instance, how student teachers are contributing to the whole life of a school. Including higher level overarching targets alongside specific targets could help student teachers to see their professional development more clearly.

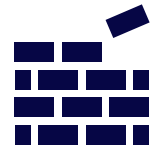
Increasing the number of interactions with the university was also suggested. This would result in better-informed Practice Tutors with regard to 'deadlines' and 'course content' experienced by their student teacher. This links to the suggestion for all Practice Tutors to make sure that they have access to all the 'available evidence' to inform any professional conversation.

In a similar vein to Forster et al. (2012), participants suggested that Mentors and Practice Tutors need to develop sufficient knowledge so that they are able to signpost student teachers to relevant materials and resources to allow them to expand their own knowledge of a topic. For example, by suggesting reading materials to support different pedagogical approaches, as opposed to the Mentor always directly telling the student about something. The same was suggested with regard to seeking support from others; with it suggested that conversations also need to direct student teachers to others who can support and encourage them as they develop. There was also the suggestion of using a 'professional friend' as an alternative term to 'Practice Tutor'.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Key findings

- *Small-scale study – 10 participants*
- *Professional conversations are based on practice and evidence from practice*
- *Building relationships is critical*
- *Sufficient preparation time is required*
- *Shared personal target setting can be effective*
- *Softer skills – such as listening and awareness of student teacher’s well-being need to be strong*



Professional conversations are integral to professional development (Nsibande, 2007), and are implicit in the way that Practice Tutors on the Open University Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Programme carry out their role. The OU ITE Programme delivers a unique route into teaching in Wales: a blended learning approach – online university teaching alongside practice placements in schools. Practice Tutors complete virtual practice review visits for student teachers and observe video recordings of their teaching. A professional conversation should take place during each practice review visit between the Practice Tutor, Mentor and student. This will enable the student to make links between the theory of their academic learning and the practice in their school placement, and reflect on their teaching and progress. It is important to note that this study is preceded by other PGCE programme research studies that explored partnership working, effective mentoring and the use of video technology to support reflection and these studies’ final reports and other outputs offer a lot more detail on these aspects (Lee, Addison-Pettit, and Tyler, 2021; Glover et al., 2023a;b; 2024)

In this instance, this small-scale study explored the way that professional conversations are understood by policy makers, defining the thinking and theory behind them as a professional development approach, and understanding the reality within the Open University’s ITE Programme.

Defining a professional conversation is not straightforward, and a literature review examined the way that policy describes professional conversations, and the way that they are used within the Welsh education context (Estyn, 2018; Welsh Government, 2019a). The synthesis of current literature noted that such conversations are successful when they focus on practice and pedagogy


(Alexander, 2008), with collaboration critical (Aderibigbe, Gray and Colucci-Gray, 2018). However, a range of aspects influence these interactions including an awareness of the culture and environment (Vygotsky, 2011, Hall, 2012), shared goals, secure knowledge, skills and attributes, clear expectations, equity of participation and openness (Connolly, Bates and Shea, 2020). Professional conversations also need to be regularly timetabled, identify strengths and use probing questioning to aid deeper reflection (Jones, Tones and Foulkes, 2019).

Following a Partnership-wide invitation to contribute to this research, 10 participants contributed; initially seven Practice Tutors volunteered to participate in either a focus group discussion or individual interview. Three written reflections were also submitted, two from student teachers and one from a Mentor. The depth of qualitative data collected was analysed to enable insight into how a professional conversation is understood and experienced.

In line with the literature, the study's findings concurred that there is no single definition for a professional conversation, yet common ground does exist in these **conversations being based on practice and evidence from practice**; being open to learning was identified as an important element of engagement in these conversations, with student teachers being proactive. Those who lead professional conversations become more adept over time and develop more nuanced approaches to ensuring positive experiences. Nevertheless, **building relationships** is an integral element of their effectiveness and particularly important in the preparation for professional conversations. Also, in parallel to the literature, **sufficient preparation time** was viewed as critical, and supporting reflection and shared personal target setting reiterated as also being central to conversations.

Offering **effective questioning and challenge** during professional conversations were also explored by many participants; with clear communication skills and understanding of programme documentation requirements also reported to be important. Research participants reported that a range of skills, knowledge and attributes are particularly beneficial to be able to conduct effective professional conversations. Findings were to some extent in agreement with the existing literature, in that practical skills such as good organisation and communication skills are valued. Yet **'softer' skills** such as 'listening' and 'being supportive' were highlighted. Linked to this was the suggestion for those leading conversations to be responsive to ensure student teachers' well-being. It was also suggested that an increase in interactions with the university provider would improve knowledge of what was expected from the student teacher.

The following presents proposed recommendations to improve the effectiveness of professional conversations, particularly those undertaken as part of the OU ITE Partnership.

5.2 Recommendations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ <i>The role and expectations of the student teacher – further research</i>➤ <i>Determine effective questions to promote critical reflection</i>➤ <i>Develop series of professional learning resources (e.g. sentence starters, role play videos)</i>	

To ensure all participants are better informed for practice review meetings, **further research** to explore the role of the student teacher in professional conversations could be beneficial – both in terms of their preparation for and their expectations of the professional conversation. The literature review identified a gap in student teacher inputs and this study’s findings also raised this issue.

Further research could also prove beneficial to determine the **types of questions** that promote critical reflection/thinking effectively. The findings from such research would contribute to the content of professional learning resources. Similarly research into the type of language to use to form effective targets could result in the development of clear exemplars – again for inclusion in professional learning resources, as discussed below.

The development of **professional learning resources** would support Practice Tutors and Mentors with ‘softer skills’. For example, sentence starters to support questioning/ discussions focusing on empathy, relationship building and active listening. Audio-visual resources in the form of role play video recordings could also be developed to share exemplars of successful practice review meetings, and/or the day in the life of a Mentor, offering effective case studies for Professional Learning.

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Appendix: Discussion group and interview questions

Introduction: Researcher/s introduction, explain that the intention for the discussion is to gather views on the experience of the practice review meeting.

Reaffirm they have consented to participate and gave permission to record the discussion, remind that this will only be used for the purposes of this research and will be destroyed once the project is complete.

It is important to note that limits to confidentiality may arise should there be any safeguarding or criminal disclosures. You do not have to answer any question if you do not wish to and have the right to withdraw at any stage.

- 1) How long have you been a Practice Tutor?
Prompt – other education experience/roles/ ITE roles/ Mentoring experience?
- 2) Please describe the recent practice review meeting I observed?
Prompt – preparation, time, structure, formality, roles, individual needs, target setting, how you felt?
- 3) What preparation did you do before the practice review meeting?
Prompt – OUiW materials, student teacher's PLP,
- 4) How was the practice review meeting structured/managed?
Prompt – who led the discussion, what was the atmosphere like, was there an agreed agenda?
- 5) How would you define a 'professional conversation'?
Prompt – what key elements are required? Do you feel that other colleagues/stakeholders define it different? If so how/why? In what ways might a professional conversation differ between colleagues compared to Mentor/student?
- 6) What was the (your?) most important learning from this practice review meeting?
Prompt – main takeaway you had? please explain how and why? Learning about the student versus learning about being a part of a professional conversation / have you taken anything away that you will go on to develop?
- 7) Did you find anything challenging during this particular practice review meeting?
Prompt – by this we mean what you have learnt, rather than practical issues – balance of relationship/ member of staff being absent? – please explain why you think this was the case/ how could it be solved? What would you do differently?
- 8) Do you have any additional comments about how to develop effective professional conversations in teacher education?

Professional conversations

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