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Exploring collaborative mentoring relationships between teachers and student teachers

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Exploring collaborative mentoring relationships between teachers and student teachers

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Abstract

Located within a broader initiative of teacher education reform in Scotland, this study explores teacher and student teacher mentoring relationships in the classroom. A preliminary study to investigate these relationships was conducted involving a focus group discussion with three teachers and an interview with a deputy head teacher in two Scottish primary schools. Findings indicate that teachers are clear about the concept of mentoring and its potential benefits for supporting a new scheme in initial teacher education. More importantly, teachers acknowledge the need for on-going training for those serving as mentors or supporter teachers and they are also positive about establishing a collaborative relationship with student teachers in the classroom based on egalitarian principles. The research showed that how a collaborative mentoring relationship between teachers and student teachers can be enhanced is one of the key questions/issues that needs to be explored in the next stages of the research.

Key words

Mentoring; supporter teacher; student teacher; socio-constructivism; initial teacher education.

Introduction

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Collaboration between teachers and student teachers has been recognised in literature as an important factor in the development of teachers' professional knowledge and skills at all levels (Lofstrom and Eisenschmidt, 2009). In some quarters, collaboration between teachers and student teachers as a mechanism to support student teachers while on field experience has become known as mentoring (Burn, 2006). However, there is confusion among educators about what active collaboration in the learning context entails. Allen (2008) argues that many teachers do not really engage with, or allow student teachers to use their initiative but rather expect them to replicate their style of teaching. Further, Wang, Odell and Schwille (2008) report that the beliefs of mentors as to what student teachers need to learn vary and this may be as a result of the differences in the theorisation of initial teacher education, school contexts and government priority in different countries. This study aims to explore teachers' and student teachers' mentoring relationships in the classroom with reference to Scottish Teacher for a New Era (STNE)¹, a new Initial Teacher Education (ITE) scheme introduced in Scotland.

The STNE initiative is funded by the Scottish Government, the Hunter Foundation and the University of Aberdeen. It aims to reform the existing teacher education programme and it involves the University of Aberdeen and six local authorities in the North-East of Scotland. Partnership, collaboration and research serve as the bedrock for its framework. This idea is reflected in the structures of the STNE Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme which is guided by socio-constructivist theory, where individuals seek to understand and appreciate the environment in which they dwell in order to construct subjective knowledge about issues, objects or events based on their experience (Creswell, 2003). The mentoring of student teachers on school experience is a key factor to both the partnership development and the professional training of both classroom teachers and students. The classroom teachers perform some mentoring duties but they are commonly referred to as supporter teachers in the Scottish context. This is based on the understanding that they are principally to provide students with necessary practical support in the classroom and engage with them in discussion aimed to enhance their professional

¹ <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stne/>

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development. However, in some schools, there could be situations where mentors are in separate offices and can be contacted by student teachers for help on some issues and this situation is most common in secondary schools.

The paper reports on an initial study driven by a set of interconnected reasons, i.e.: 'personal, practical and scholarly' (Maxwell, 2005 in Nguyen, 2009, p.657). For personal reasons, being an international student, this study offers me the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the research context. I need to be well attuned to the specific nature of teacher education as a field of study which is heavily shaped not only by global but also local socio-cultural and political practices (Menter, Mahony and Hextall, 2004). For practical reasons, this study was used to determine the feasibility of a forthcoming main study aimed at exploring teachers' and student teachers' mentoring relationships in classroom settings. Lastly, the scholarly reason for the study was to get an initial feel for the cultural context of teachers' work starting from the teachers' own experience and beliefs about mentoring relationships.

Methodology

To collect data for this study, I used the qualitative approach of a focus group discussion and an interview. Nguyen (2009) citing Maxwell (2005) argues that a qualitative approach has the potential to fulfil the interconnected reasons, i.e. personal, practical and scholarly reasons, which informed this study. This is because the qualitative approach provides the opportunities to explore teachers' experiences with respect to their interpretations and understanding of teacher and student teacher relationships in the classroom context. I used a purposive sampling technique to select two schools (sites) and four teachers (participants) for this study. For the sites, I chose two schools in Aberdeen city which had hosted large numbers of student teachers in the past because I knew that they had plenty of experience of the mentoring process. To select the participants, I sent letters to the head teachers of the two schools asking them to identify some volunteers amongst the teachers who had some experience of supporting student teachers in their classrooms. Initially, five teachers from the first school and three teachers from the second school

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agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. However, only three teachers from the first school were eventually able to participate in the focus group. I chose a focus group discussion for this study as it allowed me to get a snapshot of the shared experience and knowledge of the participants regarding a teacher and student teacher mentoring relationship. It also gave room for participants' diverse views to be aired and considered in the study. In the second school, the third person a deputy headteacher volunteered to be interviewed alone. I used a semi-structured schedule for the interviews because it allowed the participant to narrate his/her views and experiences without any restriction (Patton, 2002), thereby offering me the opportunity to garner rich data for this study.

The data collection process complied with ethical guidelines in educational research as no names of participants or schools were mentioned, participant involvement was voluntary and information gathered was used for the purpose of this research alone (e.g. Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). I conducted the focus group discussion and the interview after school hours in the two schools as agreed with the research participants and our discussion did not go beyond 30 minutes as earlier agreed. I digitally recorded both the focus group discussion and the interview with the participants' consent and I transcribed all our discussion verbatim. I identified five important areas which informed the focus group and interview schedules and they were based on: perceptions about mentoring, qualities of supporter teachers/mentors' relationships with university tutors and student teachers, co-teaching in the classroom and training for mentors/supporter teachers. I then matched the data collected with the five areas and presented them in contextual form as findings of the study. The combination of two data sets provided an opportunity for triangulation in this study as it became possible to compare and contrast the views of the participants. To validate the data as a truthful representation of the participants' views, I sent a summary report to the teachers for checking their individual responses so as to gain feedback from the participants, i.e. No objection was made in connection with the report. The focus group data is coded as "fgd" and the interview data is coded as "int". The same schedule used for the focus group discussion and the interview is attached as an appendix.

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Results

Meaning and relevance of mentoring in the ITE context

Mentoring was seen by teachers in this study as a reciprocal support mechanism; teachers benefitted and learned from the student teachers whilst helping to develop the student teachers' personal and professional development.

'I have learned a lot from people that I have mentored' (fgd) Teacher 2.

'We are learning from students who are telling us things and they are learning from us I think by watching the experience teacher teach' (fgd) Teacher 3.

The deputy head teacher echoed the teachers' views but she also distinguished mentoring and supporting as being two different activities perhaps because of her management role in the school:

'A mentor is someone there to suggest, to share good practice, to be there for discussions on any issues or problems that come up. A supporter teacher is someone who is in class... teaching and showing the student or probationer the good practice. But a mentor is there outside a classroom for a student teacher or probationer to go to for help if he/she has problems' (int.).

Qualities expected of a good mentor/supporter teacher

The data suggest that some skills and qualities are considered important by teachers for effective collaborative mentoring relationships in the classroom context:

'Not being judgemental, being approachable, finding answers for the students when they don't have answers' (fgd) Teacher 1.

'Willingness to give up their time because it does take a lot of time' (fgd) Teacher 3.

The deputy head teacher's views were in agreement with those of the teachers.

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'I think they have to be very good practitioners themselves, they have to show huge commitment, they have to be very patient and willing to look at things in a flexible way. In the classroom context, a supporter teacher would have to be someone who is flexible because they have to allow someone into their classroom and allow them to take forward the learning and teaching in a way that might not be the same as theirs' (int.).

Relationships with university tutors and student teachers.

Teachers indicated that they had good working relationships with university tutors:

'We have had contact with a lot of with tutors... when they come in to school, they fit in with us. They don't demand any special treatment' (fgd) Teacher 1.

'They're quite grateful to have the student placed with us, yes!' (fgd) Teacher 3.

The deputy teacher added her view, reflecting:

'I would say we had a good relationship but not a very quality relationship and that isn't really a negative thing. I just don't think we spend enough time talking to one another. I think we need to talk about what is the university expectation of the support teacher, but also of the students' (int.).

The teachers also indicated that their relationships with students are mostly good.

'The majority of them are hard workers, ready to learn' (fgd) Teacher 2.

'I would say we had on the whole, a good relationship with students' (int.).

However, one of the teachers pointed out that some student teachers, though very few in number, did not co-operate or perform as well as would have been expected of them.

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'I have one incident in the last few years where a student is just basically pulling away, not producing any paper work, not doing her timing and that was quite difficult' (fgd) Teacher 3.

Co-teaching in the classroom context.

Collaboration and co-teaching in the classroom between supporter teacher/mentor and student teacher is seen as a good practice.

'Yes, it's part of their learning experience' (fgd) Teacher 2.

'We didn't have somebody to train us like that when we were students. So I think it's part of our job. And we have additional help I suppose. You have somebody in your class. When you have a student, you are getting help in your class' (fgd) Teacher 3.

The deputy head teacher also thought this:

'I would say that is a good idea. I think now teachers are more conducive to the idea of anyone coming into their classroom and working alongside them' (int.).

Training for supporter teachers/mentors.

The teachers considered training for those supporting students as important.

'It is good for teachers to go on courses if they are going to have a student so that they will know what is expected them. We need to know what our roles are' (fgd) Teacher 3.

'To be updated, yes. How can you help people if you don't know and it changes all the time? Yes, over the past three years it has changed, even with STNE. So we have to be up to date' (fgd) Teacher 1.

Similarly, the deputy head teacher added:

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'I would say yes I think it would be a good idea to have some more training... A lot of role play and talking to other people who have been supporter teachers, so again sharing good practice would be a way as well'(int.).

Discussion

Firstly, the findings of this study suggest that teachers' views of what mentoring entails seem to reflect the current literature. Mentoring has support as its main goal and it is diverse in terms of its conceptualisation and application (Harrison and Pell, 2006). Teachers in this study consider that mentoring is good practice in ITE because it has the potential to assist both the supporter teachers and the student teachers in developing relevant professional knowledge and skills. The implication of this finding is that mentoring in ITE is rooted in participation and learning by apprenticeship. Thus, students can learn from their supporter teachers but they can also make contributions that can be of benefit to the supporter teachers as well as the pupils.

Secondly, the findings revealed that a supporter teacher would be able to discharge his/her duty diligently and professionally when he/she possesses some qualities and skills. As indicated by the teachers, a good supporter teacher is expected to be accommodating, open to learning oriented discussion and a good listener. This indicates that the power of participation, effective listening and co-responsibility for what happens in the teaching and learning context cannot be under-estimated. If these are taken seriously, there is an opportunity for more effective teacher and student teacher relationships in the ITE context. This finding is consistent with the views that learning and teaching involve multifarious tasks in ITE (Tang, 2003) and supporter teachers/mentors need to be skilful to function effectively. Tomlinson (2004) suggests that a good mentor requires listening skills to function effectively in the personal and professional context. Similarly, Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005) contend that development of interpersonal skills because of mentoring could enhance both student teachers and teachers' professional development. So, it is important to explore the language of listening as it affects teacher and student

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teacher relationships and co-participation within classroom contexts. It is also necessary to explore how teachers are utilising other skills to relate with student teachers in the classroom context.

Thirdly, the findings illustrate that teachers enjoy good working relationships with students but not entirely with university tutors. As one respondent noted, it could be worthwhile for more time to be dedicated by university tutors to engage with them. This shows that commitment and effective communication between ITE providers, student teachers and supporter teachers cannot be over-emphasised in the enactment of effective mentoring relationships in the ITE context. Menter (2008) acknowledges improvement in some ITE contexts but suggests that it would be helpful to improve the relationships between ITE providers and schools with regard to student placement as poor relationships are noticed in some quarters. Perhaps, this could be the reason why it is argued that teacher education is not often genuinely given adequate attention in schools (Menter, Brisard and Smith, 2006). This problem of communication could be as a result of a number of factors but most importantly, organisational culture and leadership style (LaBoskey and Richert, 2002) have the potential to hinder or aid the effectiveness of human relationships in ITE settings. Apart from the communication problem, it is important to explore the other factors that could generally hinder effective engagement between teachers and student teachers in the classroom context.

Fourthly, the findings show that collaborative mentoring practices especially in the classroom context could assist both teachers and student teachers to learn from each other and possibly improve on their professional practice. It could therefore be speculated that collaboration is a measure that truly needs to be encouraged because of its potential benefits to all those involved such as teachers and student teachers. For example, through collaboration both teacher and student teacher can learn from each other while pupils' learning can also be enhanced. This finding is consistent with some literature on mentoring relationships. Fieman-Nemser and Beasley (1997) suggest that the involvement of mentors in student teachers' activity in schools could be seen as cooperative effort to assist and not an invasion as seen

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by some teachers. Such an approach is considered to be in line with Vygostky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory which indicates that assistance could be given by supporter teachers when it is observed that beginning teachers need help to get over a challenge while teaching in classrooms (Fieman-Nemser and Beasley, 1997). Apart from the potential benefits to students from the extension of a collaborative relationship in classrooms, this study also confirms that teachers could benefit from such practices. As the participant teachers mentioned, it is good in that the student teachers may bring in new ideas and, based on the experience of the supporter teacher, such ideas may be refined to the benefit both of them and the pupils too. Le Cornu (2005) cited in Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell and Merrell Hansen (2008) argued that the culture of collaboration enhances teachers' professional development and significantly reduces the sense of isolation among teachers. Since collaboration is adjudged to be significant from this data, conditions and activities that can facilitate effective collaboration and co-participation between supporter teacher and student teacher in the classroom need to be explored in this research context.

Lastly, the findings also reveal that training has the potential to enhance mentoring skills for supporter teachers. Although the teachers argued that some of them are naturally endowed with skills needed for effective mentoring relationships, they all agree that provision of regular and adequate training could take their professional practice to another level. This indicates that on-going training for teachers involved in mentoring practice should be taken seriously by ITE providers and partner schools. It also suggests that teachers need to be encouraged and provided with opportunities to attend training programmes such as CPD events. Goodson and Hargreaves (2005) state that helping a teacher at any level to learn well is a tactical way of helping the students to learn. It can also be added that the existence of an enabling environment capable of helping teachers to develop new skills to improve their practice is a necessity in ITE settings. Perhaps, this is the reason why continuous professional development (CPD) aimed at providing relevant information to prepare them for mentoring roles seems to be identified by teachers as a means of updating their knowledge about their expectations and that of the student teachers

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while on field experience. Drawing on this, it is necessary to explore the challenges experienced by teachers in their roles as supporter teachers and also to find out if there are other forms of information or training that would be necessary for effective collaboration apart from CPD events.

Conclusion and implications for further study

This is a small scale study which presents the perceptions of teachers on collaborative mentoring relationships. With this in mind, I do not intend to generalise based on the findings of the study. However, the study reveals that the constructivist principle of the co-construction of learning is a two-way process for the participant teachers and student teachers on field experience. Also, the study has implications for learning and teaching practice in the ITE context as it explicates the importance of communication, co-participation and training for effective mentoring practice between teachers and student teachers. Apart from these, the study raised some fundamental issues that need to be explored for the overall objectives of this research to be realised. For example, there is the need to explore the kind of activities and conditions that can provide teachers and student teachers with the opportunities to collaborate effectively in mentoring relationships within the classroom and deal with the challenges involved. Also, there is a need to examine teacher and student teacher interaction in action so as to determine the kind of relationships and cultures that promote collaboration between teachers and student teachers in the classroom within different school settings. Exploring the views of student teachers and university tutors in a main study also becomes important as the triad between the trio of teachers, student teachers and university tutors is a necessity for effective teacher and student teacher relationships, especially in a new ITE scheme. Wang et al. (2008) argue that developing a mentoring framework as a result of the perceptions of mentors about mentoring without examining the views of student teachers about effective mentoring could lead to mentor-centred practice. Discussion of mentoring relationships from these tripartite perspectives is also important for triangulation purposes and for informing debate on current mentoring practices in the ITE context.

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Appendix 1

Focus Group and Interview Questions

1. What do you understand by mentoring in initial teacher education context?
2. How would you differentiate between a mentor and a supporter in teacher initial teacher education?
3. What do you think about mentoring practice in initial teacher education?
4. What would you consider as qualities expected of a mentor/supporter teacher in initial teacher education?

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5. In addition, what are the qualities expected of a mentor/supporter teacher in a classroom context?
6. From your experience, how would you describe your relationships with University tutors?
7. How would you describe your relationships with student teachers?
8. What do you think about the idea of co-teaching with student teachers when they are on placements?
9. What is your view about the need for training to be given to supporter teachers about mentoring practice?
10. If training is necessary, what sort of training would recommend for a mentor/supporter teacher?

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