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Through the eyes of the mentor: framing expectations within preservice teacher and mentor relationships

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Abstract:

Mentoring relationships during pre-service education are a significant relationship through which emerging teachers negotiate their teacher identity (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009; Hudson, 2010). It is therefore important to understand how mentor teachers frame their expectations. This paper explores mentoring relationships established within a Queensland partnership program funded through the Federal Government's Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership Agreement (DEEWR, 2011). Within the broader policy context, these mentoring relationships were seen as an important space for pre-service teachers to experience cultural induction into Education Queensland schooling, and be advocates for quality teaching (Willis, Bahr, Bannah, & Welch, 2012).

Interview and survey data from 14 teacher mentors were analysed using a dialectic constant comparison approach (Dick 2007). Three significant themes were identified. Teacher mentor's understanding of their roles positioned pre-service teachers as either novices or alternatively as colleagues, and these had implications for the opportunities for learning that were then made available to the pre-service teachers. The teacher mentor's beliefs about teaching as a practical craft, and how the mentor teachers judged a pre-service teacher's "enthusiasm" were also analysed. Understanding the factors that guide teacher mentor approaches may inform future designs of mentoring and preservice teacher preparation programs.

Introduction and Context

As part of the Australian Federal Government's Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership Agreement, five (5) Teacher Education Centres of Excellence were created to work in partnership with universities to support pre-service teachers into permanent employment in Education Queensland schools (Department of Education and Training, 2012). One of these, identified in this paper, as TECE worked directly in partnership with a large university in Brisbane and four metropolitan partner schools. Pre-service teachers were invited to apply for the TECE in the third year of their early childhood, primary or secondary Bachelor of Education degree. Acceptance into the TECE program was determined by criteria utilised in relation to an application, personal statement, university grade point average and an interview. School-based mentoring was identified as an important component of the program through which pre-service teachers could experience cultural induction into state schooling. Each pre-service teacher in the TECE program was assigned a teacher mentor from their placement school who they worked with for an extended period of 12 to 15 months.

 The role of the TECE mentor was framed in the government policy as "improving the field experiences of pre-service teachers through the provision of quality supervision, mentoring and support to pre-service teachers" and "making stronger connections between the theoretical and practical elements of programs" (Department of Education and Training, 2012). The teacher mentors were not responsible for assessing the pre-service teacher's teaching performance. Teacher mentors were accepted into the TECE program following submission of an application and approval from the school principal, and with a commitment to undertake extended mentoring training. Drawing on the perspectives of teacher mentors reflecting on their experiences of mentoring in this partnership program, this paper evaluates how the mentors understood their roles and consequently how they framed the mentor relationship and experiences.

Literature

Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009) describe educational mentoring as "usually an experienced classroom teacher who accepts into his/her classroom a pre-service teacher who participates actively in classroom activities while learning the instructional and professional skills needed"(p. 46). How mentors understand the purpose of their mentoring roles influences the approach of the mentor and the priorities they perceive as important for pre-service teacher learning. These priorities can emerge as the mentoring work begins, as "mentoring is first and foremost, a highly personal relationship involving a journey for both the beginning teacher and the mentor" (Bullough, 2012, p. 67).

Some definitions of mentoring position mentors as experts and pre-service teachers as novices (Iancu-Haddad & Optlatka, 2009). However, when teachers position themselves or are positioned as expert and the pre-service teachers as novice, the relationship is one way, with pre-service teachers expected to "cooperate by responding to teacher advice" (Patrick, 2013, p. 211). This creates tensions between pre-service teachers having the freedom to practice and the need for pre-service teachers to comply. A community of practice approach enables the expertise of the mentor to be acknowledged, and shift from a hierarchical approach to a more collaborative approach (Patrick, 2013; Wenger, 1998). From this perspective a mentor provides "psychological support, technical assistance, and guidance regarding local rules and policies" (Iancu-Haddad & Optlatka, 2009, p. 47) which also includes "knowledge about the school, staff, wider community, codes of conduct, emergency operations, and information about school traditions and procedures" (Hudson, 2010, p. 31). Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggest, "the overall objective of teacher mentoring programs is to give newcomers a local guide" (p. 3). How pre-service teachers are oriented towards their role in teaching constitutes a participation framework or "horizon of meaning" against which some interactions have greater significance (Connell, 2011, p. 90). The framework that mentor teachers create about their own work informs their expectations, and the opportunities they make available to the pre-service teachers.

While there are obvious benefits for pre-service teachers in the mentoring relationship, collaborative relationships within mentoring can have positive benefits for the mentor. It "enables mentors to learn new things about themselves or refresh professional practices and perspectives they may have neglected" (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009, p. 56). Targeted mentor training enhances knowledge, skills and strategies to support pre-service teachers in positive and effective ways (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009; Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). Further, through taking on a mentor role, a teacher's status may be enhanced from "the responsibility involved and a corresponding enhanced recognition in the professional community" (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009, p. 210).

Drawing on the perspectives of teacher mentors reflecting on their experiences of mentoring in this partnership program, this paper critically evaluates how the mentors understood their roles and consequently how they framed the mentor relationship and experiences.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data was gathered from 14 teacher mentors after the first 12 months of their mentoring relationship with their pre-service teacher. Three focus group interviews were conducted at the various host school sites mid year, and a reflective survey was completed by the teacher mentors and discussed at an additional focus group at the end of the year. Questions included:

- Why did you volunteer to be a mentor?

- In what ways was your role similar or different to what you expected?
- What experiences have helped your preservice teacher develop?
- Provide three adjectives that describe your preservice teacher.
- What have been the benefits and challenges from the process so far?
- What have you learned about your own practice since becoming a teacher mentor?

The data was analysed using a dialectic constant comparison approach, with the three researchers noting overlaps, agreements and disagreements between data sets (Dick 2007). An open coding approach that enabled the development of abstract ideas (Charmaz 2008) was used in the analysis. From this clustering of themes and ideas, the concepts were identified and reviewed against the literature.

Results

Three key themes about how teacher mentors negotiated their roles emerged from the data. These were perceptions of:

1. their mentoring role
2. teaching as situated and practical; and
3. important characteristics they looked for in a pre-service teacher.

While mentors each had unique experiences, these individual stories are not represented in the following discussion. Instead collective voices and patterns that speak to broader cultural narratives about mentoring are identified for further exploration.

1. The Mentoring Role.

Some mentors saw themselves as experts in a hierarchical relationship through comments like "I wanted to pass on the knowledge I had". As experts, they perceived their role as one of providing answers to questions, giving "insider information" and making decisions about "what I think they should be exposed to" such as "my communication of my teaching strategies." In these mentoring relationships, pre-service teachers were positioned as novices who were there to learn "the things that help a teacher survive" and how to "cope out there" in their first year of teaching as "they can teach, but they know nothing" with little recognition of the skills or expertise that the pre-service teacher could bring to the relationship.

A more collegial approach was evident when some teacher mentors reflected that "we treat them as an equal" and tell them to "just jump in and go for it". For some this perception emerged as the relationship developed: "what I didn't expect was the large amount of information I gained from working with [the pre-service teacher]". In this type of relationship the pre-service teacher was positioned as a co-professional who could work alongside their teacher mentor to negotiate topics, ideas and expectations. Through these professional mentoring conversations, "we spent more time unpacking how a school worked. I suspect that this altered the relationship." In some cases, the mentor deliberately challenged the pre-service teacher's positioning of him or herself: "I needed to provide situations where the student was forced to see themselves more as a colleague rather than a teacher-student relationship." Collegial relationships had additional benefits for mentors.

Teacher mentors indicated that they rarely had opportunities for deliberate reflection, and through the professional, collegial relationship with the pre-service teacher they were afforded this opportunity. One teacher mentor commented "I have been forced to think about why I do things. Things that have become second nature or habit (both good and bad) and having the mentee has made me think about why and explore other options." Thus mentoring was perceived as an opportunity to be 'mindful' of their learning, and to verbalise embodied or tacit professional knowledge. It was through these reflections teacher mentors believed that they could improve their own practice or have their practices and beliefs affirmed.

2. Teaching as situated and practical

Within the data, teaching was framed as a situated profession where 'real' learning occurred in context. The mentors described how the pre-service teachers got to "see how things develop" and see "behind the scenes" and "the other parts of teaching". One mentor in a secondary school setting noted pre-service teachers had to learn how "the machine works" and how to "cope", reflecting that being a teacher is situated both within and beyond a classroom, and is political. The mentor teachers reflected that within traditional university practical placements, "I don't have time to teach that other stuff." Learning experiences identified by teacher mentors as supporting 'real' learning included: observations; speaking to various school staff; what to do when things didn't work; report card writing; planning; excursions; parent-teacher interviews and informal communications; and school-based professional development. Teacher mentors emphasised that situating the pre-service teacher within the daily life of the school ensured that they could understand what it meant to be a 'real' teacher and that the "mentee needs experience to have understanding." The long term situated learning experience was seen as helping pre-service teachers begin at their first school "equipped" with some specific knowledge. While some mentors wanted to help the preservice teacher negotiate the theory and practice gap more specifically, they needed from the university " more information of the students program, what (and when) they are studying during the semester. It might assist us to provide/target activities to supplement their study and needs". The different time frames of schools and university were also identified as a tension in providing a full practical immersion into learning the practice of teaching.

3. Characteristics of the pre-service teacher.

Teacher mentors expressed a desire for enthusiastic pre-service teachers. This quality was defined as exhibiting effective communication skills, the ability to ask questions, active participation, and a willingness to learn and to show initiative in the classroom. For the teacher mentor, enthusiasm was evident when the pre-service teacher was a willing participant, who demonstrated appreciation for the opportunity to learn within the relationship.

Mentors acknowledged that they appreciated the relationships that were founded upon clear expectations and good communication that allowed them to "know what we wanted from each other; [to have the] flexibility to cater for, share and accept ideas; to treat each other as a professional" and to have "a willingness to listen by both parties". This enabled the pre-service teacher to "politely challenge" their teacher mentor, which was perceived as showing interest and a deeper understanding of what was occurring in the classroom. This, for teacher mentors, was enthusiasm. Some teacher mentors described their pre-service teachers as "arrogant" citing a lack of overt enthusiasm. This was perceived when the preservice teachers were hesitant to ask questions, prioritised their own learning agenda, and did not take up the opportunities that were offered to teach a class.

Discussion

If the relationship that developed between the pre-service teacher and their teacher mentor was dependent upon how the pre-service teacher was positioned as either a novice or a colleague, important implications need to be considered. Firstly during professional learning there is an opportunity to include mentor teachers in the discussion of the different roles they can take on, either as the expert or the more expert colleague. While acknowledging each mentor/pre-service teacher relationship will differ greatly, teacher mentors can develop awareness about the range of roles and repertoires available to them, and the possible impact on pre-service teacher identities.

Secondly, the potential for teacher mentors to develop a better understanding of explicit links to the university program would have allowed the teacher mentors to provide more relevant learning experiences in context for the pre-service teachers. This provides logistical challenges, as pre-

service teachers experience a great range of preparation programs, and teacher mentors with multiple demands on their time may not prioritise reading through background material or attending orientation workshops run by universities. There is an additional ethical dilemma about how much information about a pre-service teacher's trajectory should be made available to teacher mentors. Making pre-service teachers the source of information positions them as the agents of their own learning, and acknowledges the personal negotiations of identity that need to occur, however it also presumes that the pre-service teachers have the communication skills to negotiate these emerging theory practice connections and dilemmas with their mentor teacher.

The importance of effective communication skills emerged from the data. If the mentor perceived the pre-service teacher as enthusiastic they were more likely to treat the pre-service teacher as a colleague. Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson (2009), posit that a successful mentoring relationship is impacted by the 'willingness' of the mentee and raises the important question about how far and by what means the mentee's willingness can be enhanced. This is particularly relevant to those pre-service teachers with reflective or introverted personalities, who do not readily display expected non-verbal signs of enthusiasm.

Conclusion

Three themes relating to the perceptions and beliefs of teacher mentors on mentoring were identified in this study. These were: how they positioned pre-service teachers in the mentoring relationship, how they perceived teaching as situated and practical, , and their perceptions of pre-service teacher enthusiasm. Understanding these factors that guide teacher mentor's approaches may inform the future design of mentoring and pre-service teacher preparation programs.

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