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Mentoring Teachers to Motivate Students

B. Reena, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate and Rosalia H. Bonjour, Ph.D.

Abstract

This review explores ways in which the mentors of trainee teachers can use research as a means of questioning, understanding and improving their own practices.

The first part presents an overview of empirical and theoretical research into mentoring relationships.

The second part presents four ways in which mentors might engage with this literature: (1) Generalisations, generated by research, can inform practice directly. (2) Mentoring can be better understood by reference to theoretical frameworks derived from the literature. (3) In-depth case studies can provide vicarious experiences of mentoring, and (4) mentors might use research methods to inquire into their own practice.

Keywords: research; initial teacher education; mentors: mentoring practice

Introduction

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Mentoring Teachers to Motivate Students

It is difficult to speak meaningfully about mentoring. Contradictions abound. Champions of mentoring often speak glowingly of its promise, while mentoring studies, commonly case studies, point toward multiple and perplexing challenges.

Mentoring Relationships Rarely Live up to Ideals

Several writers have related modern conceptions of mentoring to its mythological roots. Discussing mentor's support of Telemachus, they have located the source of mentor's helping in the older person's wisdom and greater experience of life. Mentoring has been defined as: “a nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development” (Anderson and Shannon 1988). Mentoring functions are carried out within the context of an ongoing, caring relationship between the mentor and the protégé.

Ideal Mentoring Situation

For experienced teachers, an ideal mentoring situation is one in which they are made to feel welcome, accepted, included and supported. They appreciate being given a clear sense of direction in terms of advice and ideas, with regular, timetabled meetings for feedback and discussion; they identify constructive feedback on their own teaching as the most important developmental activity.

The ideal mentor demonstrates training, empowers students, is sympathetic, stimulated by new ideas, approachable, has students' confidence, good sense of humour, motivated, careful, patient and tolerant, accepts own failings, shows humility committed to pupils, wishing to develop .

Bullough and Draper (2004: 271-288) stated that since mentors were expected to fulfil a variety of roles, within a demanding conception of the 'proper' mentor, some of them, unable to live up to these expectations, embraced an attitude of 'cool professionalism' towards their mentees, masking their true feelings about teaching and mentoring.

Mentoring Roles and Functions

In a large-scale survey, Clarke and Jarvis-Selinger (2005) reported that 52% of mentors had a nurturing perspective to their own teaching, while many others had a perspective that included nurturing.

This perspective implies that 'learning has a significant emotional component' (Clarke and Jarvis-Selinger, 2005) , and that good teaching involves caring for students, helping them to reach their goals and supporting efforts as well as achievements, while others claimed that mentors saw themselves, not only supporting, but actively teaching - guiding, providing information, offering practical strategies, feedback on lessons and assessment. Describing the assessing aspect, characterised mentors as 'judge, jury and sometimes executioner rolled into one'

The Role of Feelings

Mentoring is suffused with feeling, although feelings are not always acknowledged. The mentor should recognise and react appropriately to the trainee's changing state of mind. Daloz (1986), reviewing case studies, says: 'The recognition that passion is central to learning and the capacity to provide emotional support when it is needed are hallmarks that distinguish the good mentor'. Mentors' sensitivity to trainees' feelings is explored in an interview study, which found that mentors felt a particular need to be sensitive when discussing matters to do with their trainees' lack of presence, enthusiasm and commitment. Whilst many trainees found their mentors supportive, a significant number did not.

Theories of Mentoring

The theories of mentoring are rooted in theories of learning to teach: 'learning by reflecting' and 'learning through apprenticeship'.

1. Learning by Reflecting

There are five traditions of reflection:

- the academic tradition' (in which reflection is focused on subject matter);
- social efficiency tradition (focused on the practical realisation of educational theory);
- the developmentalist tradition (focused on learner development);
- the social reconstructivist tradition' (focused on issues of justice and democracy); and
- the generic tradition (in which reflection is an end in itself).

How Does Mentoring Help?

Mentoring meetings can enable the student to reflect deeply on their experience of teaching, and to arrive at their own conclusions. The mentoring, which involves professional development, and counselling, has a therapeutic purpose. Reflection is an inward journey, particularly in the case of **core reflection** which happens when a trainee has a problem - she is unable to manage pupils' poor behaviour. Although such a trainee's mentoring might contain only advice, perhaps to do with altering the use of voice or posture, it might be better if she were encouraged to consider her beliefs about herself, or her sense of her own identity as a teacher. A mentor might engage with the practical implications of this theory by asking: 'Can my trainee simply alter certain behaviours or is the cause of the problems more deeply rooted?' If the latter is the case, the mentor might employ the means of core reflection.

Levels of reflection are likened to an onion, with behaviours at the outer edge and, progressing inwards, the levels of competences, beliefs, identity and mission. Exploring these levels, mentors

might encourage trainees to realise that they possess certain **core qualities** like: *empathy, flexibility, sensitivity and courage*.

2. Learning through Apprenticeship

The theory of learning by reflecting has been challenged by those who view learning to teach as an apprenticeship. For example, Brown and McIntyre's (1993) empirically-based work stated: 'Experienced teachers are analogous to "master craftsmen"- craft is work in which experience improves performance' and it 'cannot be learned in weeks or even months'. This view of teaching is at the heart of the apprenticeship theory, in which trainees learn by observing mentors and by imitating their teaching practices. The mentor is a major agent for the trainee's development, advising, directing and offering 'practical tips'.

Learning to teach is a matter of acquiring a type of knowledge that is called **pedagogical tact**. Acquiring pedagogical tact becomes real in the very act of teaching. This means that by observing and imitating how the teacher animates the students, walks around the room, uses the blackboard, and so forth, the student teacher learns how to feel confident with these students.

Theories in Practice

Clarke (1995) found that, in watching videos of their mentoring, mentors were surprised by how little they allowed their trainees to contribute actively to the discussions. Consequently they switched their emphasis from telling to enquiring and were able to encourage reflection when they

- (a) presented a multiplicity of perspectives on teaching;
- (b) examined two or three days of the trainees' teaching in depth;
- (c) prompted trainees to theorise about their teaching practices; and
- (d) encouraged them to entertain uncertainty.
- (e) 'Learning to become a mentor ... does not "emerge" naturally from being a good teacher of children'.

The Content of Mentoring Meetings

In an apprenticeship approach, mentoring conversations are largely concerned with technical matters of teaching, whereas a reflective approach is more likely to contain discussion in which such matters are related, either to their wider contexts, including educational theories, or to the inner beliefs of the trainee.

In a questionnaire survey of ninety mentors Wright and Bottery (1997) found that the respondents considered practical matters such as 'planning and providing a clear focus for students' lessons' and 'emphasising classroom management' to be overwhelmingly more important than 'discussing the relationship between schools and society' or 'considering educational theory'. These studies suggest that the practical business of teaching and classroom

management tend to dominate conversations between mentors and their trainees because such matters are major concerns of both parties. Rather than attending to their trainees' developmental needs as teachers, the mentors focused on training them to teach the curriculum because 'the need to ensure that pupils proceed apace through the curriculum was a constant and important responsibility' .

Generalisations, Generated by Research, Can Inform Practice Directly

Mentors perceive their roles in different ways, emphasising aspects to do with listening, enabling, organising, trouble-shooting, supporting or teaching, acting as a friend, a colleague or a parent-figure. Some mentors see challenges as important; for others, support is crucial. Some mentors tend to give advice whilst others employ a tentative approach.

The mentor/trainee relationship is central to the process and trainees hope to feel welcome, accepted, included and supported by mentors. Mentoring meetings are largely concerned with practical matters of teaching and rarely deal with educational theory. Because of the intimate nature of mentoring, it is difficult for mentors to learn by observing other mentors, but case studies can help them understand their own experiences of mentoring in the light of other peoples.

Mentors Might Use Research Methods to Inquire into Their Own Practice

Research reports can suggest methods that mentors can use to investigate their own practice: like written accounts, such as journals, questionnaires, email communications and documents such as lesson observation forms. They may also use individual and group interviews.

Of course mentors can inquire into their own practice without using research methods. Nevertheless, 'those teachers with first-hand experience of a research culture seem better able to view professional practice through an “evidence-informed” lens, bringing their understanding of research to bear if their professional context allows.

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