Prescription and practice:

a small-scale, democratic evaluation of mentoring provision on a higher education teacher training programme

Clare Tyrer
Lancaster University

ABSTRACT

Mentoring is generally perceived to be an important aspect of initial teacher education. However, the quality of provision is variable, shaped considerably by societal and political conditions. The aim of this democratic evaluation was to look beyond a prescribed view of mentoring to examine how it was understood by different practitioners on a higher education teacher training programme, the range of collective, routinised activities undertaken and the nature of interaction in the mentoring relationship. The findings suggest that the success of the practice depends largely on the extent to which internal and external power dynamics affect the mentoring relationship.

KEYWORDS

MENTORING
SOCIAL PRACTICE
EVALUATION
DEMOCRATIC
POWER RELATIONS
SUPPORT
STAKEHOLDERS
TRIADIC

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the quality of support can be inconsistent (Ingleby & Hunt, 2008), the mentoring relationship is generally perceived to be an important aspect of initial teacher education. The basic premise of the practice is a more knowledgeable and experienced individual intentionally supports a novice teacher during the training programme with a view to developing subject pedagogy, teaching and learning capabilities and, often, enculturation into a department or institution.

In the mentoring literature, there is confusion as to what constitutes the role of a mentor, described variously as a 'parent figure', 'trouble shooter', 'scaffolder' (Abell et al., 1995), 'facilitator' (Saunderset al., 1995), 'supervisor' (Watkins & Walley, 1993) and 'critical friend' (Clutterbuck, 2001). Mentoring is generally portrayed in a positive light; adjectives such as 'supportive', 'caring' and 'nurturing' litter the mentoring discourse, implying that the behaviour of mentors must be altruistic and selfless. Mentors are expected to seamlessly balance the demands of their mentoring role with their teaching, pastoral, administrative and, possibly, management duties.

The purpose of this evaluation was to go beyond a description of mentoring functions and models to examine what practitioners do on a routinised basis. Because the mentoring practice is situated in a variety of contexts, it will undoubtedly evolve and be interpreted differently according to the requirements of the institution (Zanting et al., 1998). Mentoring does not exist independently of social, political and institutional factors, and these need to be considered when carrying out any evaluation.

2. SITUATING THE EVALUATION

2.1 Theoretical framework

According to Schatzki (1996: 87), a practice is a 'temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked to practical understandings, rules, teleo-affective structures and

general understandings'. A practice-based approach is a useful lens through which to evaluate the mentoring process as it enables the researcher to obtain knowledge of the habitual network of activities which constitute a practice, how these are understood and valued, and relational aspects. Because practices occur repeatedly, they can become normalised and shape our identity. For example, there are certain behaviours expected of mentors. They should regularly devote time to the mentoring relationship; be skilled at reflection, challenging their mentees' assumptions about teaching and learning; be adept at listening as they manage the emotional aspects of the process (Odell and Ferraro, 1992; Bullough, 2005; Hobson, 2016), and able to marry the theoretical and practical aspects of mentoring.

Carrying out an evaluation from a social practice perspective enables the internal evaluator to focus on the lived experiences of the practitioners. It also provides a strong theoretical foundation for developing knowledge of a practice. Here, evaluation was not perceived as an abstract concept concerned with accountability. The aim was not to obtain concrete outcomes of the effectiveness of the mentoring provision using predetermined evaluative criteria: practices will be enacted and interpreted differently by actors congruent with their situated realities. Instead, this self-evaluation sought to depict the actualities of the mentoring practice through the representation of all relevant stakeholders.

A social practice analytical framework links to the principles of deliberative democratic evaluation (House & Howe, 2000, 2003) the aim of which is to reach unbiased conclusions based on the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders (House, 2005), including those who are often neglected in the evaluative process. This evaluation adopted an inclusive approach in its design and implementation to emphasise the day-to-day occurrences of the mentoring practitioners to discover what was working effectively. Furthermore, it was felt that by enabling respondents to experience different perspectives, positive changes in practice might ensue.

2.2 The evaluation context

The context of the evaluation is an in-service two-year higher education teacher training programme. The course attracts individuals from a variety of academic and vocational disciplines and culminates in a professional qualification to teach in diverse settings within the post-compulsory sector (PCET).

The questions which guided the evaluation were the following:

1. What principles and activities characterise the mentoring practice on the teacher education programme?

2. How has the mentoring practice evolved during the programme?

3. To what extent do contextual factors shape the mentoring relationship?

3. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

It was important initially to emphasise the purpose of the evaluation, namely one for knowledge rather than being performance-driven, and how the findings would be utilised. Active stakeholder involvement in the evaluation from the outset had an important role in influencing its outputs. In preference to making definite recommendations, a more nuanced approach was adopted, one which continued to emphasise participation of stakeholders.

3.1 Stages of the evaluation

3.1.1 Nominal group technique

Dialogue with the mentees on the teacher training programme was initiated by inviting them to co-construct the foci of the evaluation; they had ongoing experiences of the practice, and their voices had largely not been heard. A form of nominal group technique (Thesen et al., 1977) was selected to encourage dialogue and debate, but also to limit the dominance of individuals. In the same space but individually, a group of mentors from the year one and two cohorts noted the most salient aspects of the practice, decided on points from their list worth highlighting and wrote these on a flipchart. I then returned to the room to encourage discussion about the content of the items deemed to be of most collective significance. In this way, I was able to gain a holistic picture of the mentees' attitudes towards the practice.

3.1.2 Online survey

The next step was to involve the mentors in the evaluation. Owing to commitment to their professional responsibilities, it had proven difficult to gather them in one place, so, to complement and elaborate on the data from the previous task, an online survey was used.

3.1.3 Interviews

The small-scale survey provided some valuable information for the primary method of data collection: semi-structured interviews. These were conducted with seven mentors and trainee teachers, although not always mentoring dyads, and with two managers involved in the organisation and delivery of the programme to obtain a broader representation of views. Participants were selected to indicate different hierarchies in the mentoring relationship (mentors as line managers, senior teachers, peers), subject specialisms, gender, stage of the programme and level of experience.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

TFollowing Schatzki's (2002) social practice theory, the findings from the online survey and interviews have been categorised into three elements: the 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of the mentoring practice; within these categories, the most significant themes arising from the data are discussed.

Although the different elements clearly overlap, the rationale for this approach was primarily for ease of analysis.

4. 1 The 'sayings' of the practice

Prior to the introduction of the new It is futile to specify the precise nature of the mentoring role, as the mentoring practice is highly variable depending on the context in which it is enacted and the personal interactions between individuals. Therefore, it was considered more valuable to establish how mentoring was constructed as a practice by those embodying it, to reveal their conceptions of the mentoring role.

It was universally agreed that mentors should act as a professional guide to support trainees as they developed their teaching capabilities during their placements. In practice, however, familiarising new teachers with departmental and institutional norms, protocols and policies generally took precedence over mentoring discussions relating to teaching and learning. Inducting trainee teachers, particularly those new to the profession, into the institution brought with it a greater sense of stability and confidence (Laker et al., 2008).

Engaged in a process of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the novice teachers became more accomplished at completing tasks demanded of them, resulting in a gradual relinquishment of control by the mentors. However, although support with departmental protocols was useful, the trainee teachers expressed some concerns that this impacted on their professional development as they had fewer opportunities to discuss teaching, learning and assessment strategies related to their subject specialism.

According to the mentees, another important role of the mentor was providing emotional support during the programme. They found the expectations and responsibilities placed upon them to be overwhelming at times, and having access to a supportive resource provided validation, reassurance and motivation, especially for those on the first year of the programme.

This emphasis on the mentors providing both pastoral and institutional support reflected the need for trainee teachers to 'hit the ground running' in their placements. Although the training programme is described as in-service, for individuals already engaged in the teaching profession the difficulty of securing a placement without any teaching qualifications means that most of the trainees are de facto pre-service. Frequently, there is neither the time nor the resources available to provide adequate support for novice teachers. This raises the question as to who benefits from the mentoring relationship. Those wishing to pursue a teaching career may accept a voluntary placement to 'get their foot in the door', to the financial advantage of the institution, but they are often subjected to the same requirements as experienced teachers.

4. 2 The 'doings' of the practice

- *Discussing departmental assessment and feedback practices*
- *Consulting lesson plans*
- *Discussing classroom teaching, learning and assessment strategies*
- *Sharing resources*
- *Reflecting on lesson observations*
- *Co-constructing teaching development points*

Figure 1

The 'doings' of the practice relate to the range of collective routinised activities on the teacher education programme, recognisable to all the practitioners but influenced by individual motivations and contextual factors. Mentoring meetings were fundamental to the practice, but the regularity and content of these varied. The findings from the mentoring co-construction exercises and online survey revealed that the nexuses of activity (shown in Figure 1) were deemed most significant in the mentoring dyad discussions.

4.2.1 Temporal aspects

In most cases, mentors initiated the process with good intentions, arranging to meet their mentee regularly and with a clear agenda in mind. However, external and institutional requirements had a significant impact on the mentoring practice, with incompatible time schedules resulting in fewer meetings over the course of the teacher education programme.

Frequently, what was at stake influenced the frequency of the mentoring meetings. One mentor commented that she had met her mentee a handful of times only to discuss imminent teaching observations. These meetings were the sole opportunity for her to examine lesson plans and talk about materials and resources. Thus, the need to comply with programme requirements took priority over more general discussions pertaining to teaching and learning. Conversations centred on Ofsted 'good practice' strategies and 'surviving' the observation rather than encouraging mentees to experiment with different teaching approaches.

4.2.2 Spatial aspects

The settings in which mentoring occurred also had a considerable impact on the 'doings' and 'relatings' of the practice. In most cases, the participants met in the staffroom or office, often because they were already working in close proximity. The meetings became less formalised during the programme and mentees tended to consult their supervisor on an ad hoc basis whenever they needed support. This set-up was preferable because it was generally felt to be more convenient and less judgemental than a more formally planned process which could also influence the dynamics of the relationship.

Essential to maintaining an effective mentoring relationship was respecting professional boundaries and recognising the importance of trust and confidentiality. For example, one mentee commented that her line manager was present in the office where the mentoring meetings took place and determined the agenda. These discussions were used as a performance management tool to focus on student achievement, counter to the ethos of mentoring as a developmental process. This example highlights some of the more worrying aspects of the mentoring practice: the 'triadic' dimension of mentoring (Colley, 2003), whereby institutional norms and goals direct the process. Here, the mentor was akin to a mouthpiece of the institution, spouting rhetoric around targets and achievement. The emphasis was on the technical aspects of a teacher's role such as assessment paperwork, but this seriously undermined the professional growth of the mentee. It also significantly affected the relational aspects of the practice, with the mentee unable to confide in her supervisor.

4.3 The 'relatings' of the practice

In this section, the term 'relational' has been used in place of 'relatings' to avoid ambiguity. Relational aspects are closely related to the 'doings' of a practice and, as seen in the previous example, these were highly significant in gauging the perceived effectiveness of the mentoring practice. In general, the practice was deemed more successful if mentees were able to access support on an informal basis, and the degree of subordination in the relationship was less overt. Several participants commented on the importance of reciprocal social relations but recognised this was not an instant process. They felt they had to prove themselves in their placements before being accepted as a legitimate team member. If their performance was perceived as inadequate, this led to difficulties.

Additionally, the practice will vary according to whether the mentor is the trainee teacher's line manager or a peer. In this evaluation, mentors in a managerial position viewed their status differently from the mentees. They felt they were able to separate the two roles and provide developmental support. However, the trainee teachers were uneasy about being mentored by their immediate supervisor. Although they were able to take advantage of their knowledge of institutional policies, they were hesitant about approaching their mentor at will.

Having a line manager as a mentor automatically constitutes a more hierarchical and controlling rather than collaborative relationship. The focus of mentoring meetings is more likely to be guided by departmental procedures than promoting teachers' professional growth (Snow-Gerrano, 2008) and mentees may feel reluctant about relaying their concerns for fear this will jeopardise their position in the institution and on the training programme.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

TThe purpose of this evaluation was to gain a deeper understanding of the principles and activities typified in the mentoring practice and its development over the two-year higher education programme. Overall, the findings highlighted the gap between prescription and actuality (Saunders, 2011). The trainee teachers valued the mentoring provision in terms of the emotional support it provided and inducting them into the institution, but discussions about subject-specific pedagogy were generally infrequent. Support waned during the two-year teacher training programme; highly functional interactions were expected to occur in the mentoring dyad, resulting in more knowledgeable and expert practitioners. If the novice teachers were considered to be making insufficient progress, they were at risk of losing their teaching placement.

Employing the principles of a deliberative democratic evaluation enabled me to hear a variety of voices at different levels of the hierarchy. By remaining open to all perspectives, I was able to gain a broader picture of the mentoring provision and some of the constraining contextual factors which hindered the relationship. One key implication of this evaluation for the mentoring practice is that at the heart of the process should be the mentees' professional development needs, not driven by external goals, but negotiated within the mentoring dyad itself (Colley, 2003). This requires a greater commitment from institutions to eschew control in favour of implementing a more supportive framework (Cunningham, 2007). It is also essential that all stakeholders are clear on their roles and expectations to ensure a more meaningful and productive relationship, one which mines the expertise and creativity of other professionals, partly to relieve some of the emotional and professional burdens placed upon mentors but also to provide a well-rounded support system.

Adopting a deliberative democratic evaluation approach was not without its challenges. Although as an internal evaluator I was ideally positioned to decide which stakeholders' perspectives to include in the evaluation, it proved difficult to balance the interests of the different stakeholders. As the focus of the evaluation shifted towards investigating issues of power, I was conscious that the most powerful voices, namely faculty heads and the principalship, were not heard. Nevertheless, I felt the emphasis on the practitioners' views was the best way of uncovering some of the principles and activities characteristic of the mentoring relationship. Further research could evaluate mentoring provision in different contexts, particularly in more challenging settings where minimal support is available. ■

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