

Mentoring in Further Education



This is the first in a series of occasional blogs drawn from research projects carried out by MA Education students at Wrexham Glyndŵr University (WGU). The first, by Rachel Whitton, who has just completed her MA Education, examines the role of mentors in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in the Post-compulsory Education and Training Sector (PcET) in a Further Education (FE) setting in Wales. Edited by John Luker, programme leader for the MA Education at WGU.

Part of my role in FE is to support in-service ITE students on professional learning programmes. Approximately 90 per cent of FE teachers enter the profession without a teaching qualification, sustaining a dual role of trainee teacher and employee at the beginning of their teaching career (Orr and Simmons, 2011). Following the revocation of the 2007 FE workforce regulations (BIS, 2012) in 2013, FE teachers do not require specific teaching qualifications. Employers now determine the teacher training requirements appropriate to their organisation and contexts of teaching. FE Institutions in Wales encourage student teachers or lecturers to hold a Postgraduate or Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or a Certificate in Education (Cert Ed). Staff mentors support in-service trainees to develop their teaching skills within their specialist area (Cullimore and Simmons, 2010).

The Education Workforce Council introduced a registration process for FE teachers in 2015 with the intention of regulating and professionalising FE teaching practices across Wales (EWC, 2017). A professional learning system now exists for all practitioners including instructors and assessors, learning support staff and managers. The development of mentoring skills in teacher education is of national interest in FE (HMIE, 2008). Welsh Government (2015) guidelines state that within their new professional learning model for educational practitioners in Wales, mentoring is an important aspect of effective collaboration and can be beneficial for all to develop practice. The new Welsh education agenda supports mentoring as a professional development opportunity, alongside the proposed new FE standards that aim to build high quality professional learning and collaborative relationships (Welsh Government, 2015).

For my MA Education dissertation I carried out an exploratory qualitative case study (Punch and Oancea, 2014) to examine how mentors are recruited and whether being a subject specific mentor impacts on the mentoring provision being given. The research focused upon defining the mentoring relationship and the quality of the provision being offered. Research participants were engaged on a PGCE programme. The research methods included focus groups and semi structured interviews that provided in-depth insights into their experiences (Thomas, 2009). The current well-established processes were also explored to identify areas for improvement. Data was collected on the many successful aspects of the programme that could also be further developed to ensure that mentors were used effectively in ITE.

Research findings indicated that whilst no formal mentoring agreements were in place, all trainee teachers had a mentor and received sufficient support during their PGCE programme. It was also found that there was a need for mentors to have subject specialist knowledge that they could share with the mentee. In addition, non-subject specific mentors were found to be supportive of trainees throughout the process of completing a PGCE programme and other aspects of in-service professional learning. The research confirmed that the community of mentors had their own unique classroom contexts and presented different opportunities for supporting the mentees to develop and implement pedagogical knowledge practices (Hudson, 2013). The use of different mentors also helped to

professionally shape the quality of teaching. The benefits were not only for the mentees, but also provided a professional development opportunity to those wanting to mentor colleagues. The research confirmed Cunningham's (2005) findings that all trainee teachers benefit from being introduced to the wider professional issues by a mentor. Additionally, that there are risks attached to being restricted into narrow domains of subject specific mentoring. Participants discussed their opportunities to observe other teachers in different subject areas, confirming the need for mentors across the organisation that would support their developing practice by allowing mentees to observe their teaching. Research findings agree with McKimm *et al.* (2007), acknowledging the advantages of peer mentoring and the importance of recognising that the mentee may require more than one mentor as their support requirements change. The research also confirmed Cunningham's (2005) suggestion that trainee teachers aspire to be mentored by someone from their own area of expertise, but that it is unrealistic to establish hard and fast rules on the matter. Findings confirmed the work of Hobson *et al.* (2015) in that subject specific mentoring is still a contested issue within the FE sector. It is suggested that in addition to supporting subject knowledge and pedagogy, ITE mentors should also focus on the emotional aspects of supporting trainee teachers. The research data indicated that building good working relationships, having the correct match in terms of personality and ability to work well together, were important factors and key qualities for mentees, as opposed to their mentors solely being subject specialists.

Based on the findings of the research, recommendations passed to the setting included the establishment of a bank of mentors from across the organisation. Trainees select a mentor from their own programme area who provide the subject specific support where required. Mentors adopt the professional role of observing practice and completing the documentation required for the PGCE programme. Mentors ensure that the mentee is teaching the key aspects of pedagogic content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1987), and translating subject matter into comprehensible forms for the learners (Monte-Sano, 2011). Furthermore, the subject specialist mentor is responsible for signposting the mentee to other mentors if they are not able to support the mentee's specific development needs.

Additional recommendations included that mentees have access to a wider selection of mentors in other programme areas, in addition to their subject specific mentor. These mentors share up-to-date expertise from their own experiences on a PGCE programme, including insight into the development of creativity and innovation in teaching practice. As suggested by Garvey *et al.* (2014), those participating in mentoring schemes make a choice about being involved. Prospective mentors sign up as a voluntary activity, choosing to aid their own professional development through the process of mentoring others which offers an opportunity for collaboration. This aligns with Hansford *et al.* (2003) where increased reflection, professional learning and role satisfaction provide mutual benefits for both parties. The aim of the relationship is to bolster functional aspects of the mentoring role, offer a more developmental approach to teaching and enable the mentee to explore their teaching practice with the support of a mentor who has recently completed the PGCE programme, where innovation and the use of technology featured heavily. To meet mentee expectations, all mentors are trained, outlining their role and types of activities that they are likely to engage in whilst in the mentor role. The mentor and mentee agree a set of clear expectations early in the relationship and the mentor receives specific training on the completion of the PGCE programme documentation.

In conclusion, my research data confirmed that in my setting, there is a valuable place in the ITE programmes offered for mentors with different knowledge and skills bases to support trainees. They support professional learning opportunities, regardless of their previous professional experience. Training offered to all involved in the ITE mentoring process may clarify roles and update the

experience of those mentors who have not been involved with a PGCE programme since qualification. There has been limited academic research into ITE in FE (Orr and Simmons, 2011). Further research is required to inform practice, specifically on mentor perceptions of the mentoring relationship. I agree with Cain (2009) who suggests that teacher mentors, by researching into mentoring, may develop wider ways of thinking, leading to a greater understanding of their own practice. My findings concur with Mathur *et al.* (2012) that further research into different mentoring practices and models will be of significant value to teacher educators. FE Institutions that choose to invest in research that explores mentoring as a professional development tool for teachers across the organisation may see the benefits to staff in terms of professional learning. Post qualification work-based research may support the sharing of best practice within their organisations. This research confirms in this local setting that there is no single definition to mentoring, as it is unique to the setting and the purpose. Also, mentors who are not in a subject-specific role have as much to offer ITE trainees on their PGCE programme as subject-specific mentors. I set out to discover and understand the existing mentoring relationships within the setting, using a case study to challenge conclusions from the current literature (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Although no claim is made here for the generalizability of my conclusions, they do add to the limited current body of research available and may form the basis of further studies to improve mentoring practices in FE based ITE.

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