Mentoring and beginning teachers' workplace learning

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Abstract

Mentoring has been the focus of much attention in the recent literature on initial teacher education, induction and approaches to professional development for experienced teachers. There have been several reasons for its prominence. There has been a growth in understanding of how beginning teachers learn, a recognition of the place of practitioner knowledge in the teaching profession together with a belief that mentoring offers a 'cost' solution to teacher training and development.

This paper briefly reviews the literature related to mentoring and beginning teacher professional learning. The key conclusions in the literature are examined in relation to findings from research into the professional learning of beginning teachers conducted in NSW government schools during 1998. Some 220 beginning teachers and 245 supervisors and mentors were surveyed and the processes of beginning teacher professional learning observed closely in six case study schools in different settings across the state. Examination of survey data using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) clearly established the importance of mentoring support in beginning teachers' professional learning in the induction year. Case study research also identified key practices, conditions and professional interactions that sustained transmission, transactional and transformational approaches to teacher learning.

The complementary qualitative and quantitative data in relation to mentoring provide new and robust evidence of the importance of this professional learning strategy in generating beginning teacher satisfaction with induction support. In particular, the analysis of qualitative data establishes the importance of mentoring in moving teacher learning beyond the simple transmission of prevailing culture and professional norms. In combination with other key conditions and practices mentoring has the potential to shift the outcomes of beginning teacher induction from transmission to transactional and transformational learning.
Mentoring and beginning teachers' workplace learning

Introduction

When a beginning teacher commences work in a school he or she is usually expected to take on the same responsibilities as veteran colleagues and is often disadvantaged by being allocated the least desirable and most difficult teaching assignments. At the same time he or she is expected to come to terms with and absorb a set of established rules, relationships, ways of behaving, and understanding that give a particular school its unique character. Commencing teaching resembles a process of transition or rite of passage that is often described as 'reality shock.' The support provided to beginning teachers at this time is critical to the quality of their immediate professional experiences as well as their longer term professional learning. Mentoring is one such form of professional support that has received widespread attention in the literature and which as been implemented in a number of teacher education and induction programs during the last two decades.

The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) beginning teacher induction program made specific reference to the use of mentors in school based induction initiatives. In 1998 an evaluation of the DET program included a close examination of types of support provided to beginning teachers with a particular focus on mentoring. The breadth and general impact of mentoring in the process of teacher induction was assessed through a survey of beginning teachers and their supervisors and mentors, while a more detailed examination of the nature of beginning teacher learning was the focus of six school case studies. This paper reports on the findings from this research in relation to mentoring and its impact on beginning teachers' workplace learning.

Review of the literature: Mentoring as a workplace learning strategy

Mentoring and induction

Mentoring has been the focus of much of the literature published over the last fifteen years on initial teacher education, teacher induction and approaches to professional development for experienced teachers. Its prominence has been due to a growth in understanding of how beginning teachers learn and a recognition of the place of practitioner knowledge in the teaching profession. However, the emergence of mentoring as a professional learning strategy has also been attributed to the convergence of economic policy and workplace learning theory. Mentoring held legitimacy as a professional learning strategy and at the same time appeared to offer a cost 'solution' in training and development for teachers.

The use of mentors during the induction phase for beginning teachers has been well documented in the United States with mentoring often being used to address issues of skill development and teacher survival. Mentoring applied in this way has often functioned a process of transmission in teacher professional learning.

Mentoring and teacher learning

Mentoring has also been described in the literature as a process that mitigates teacher isolation, promotes the concept of an educative workplace and that leads to the creation or understanding of consensual norms in a school, faculty or grade team. Applied in this way, mentoring as a professional learning strategy resembles Marsick and Watkins' process of 'dialogic (transactional) learning'. Through this transactional approach several writers have also identified significant impacts of mentoring on the mentors themselves. Studies of mentors involved in internship and induction programs reported that serving as a mentor caused experienced teachers to reflect on their own teaching knowledge, beliefs and
practices and broaden their professional knowledge. These findings serve as further evidence that mentoring as a workplace learning strategy is an interactive dynamic process of professional learning in contrast to the uni-dimensional process implied by the transmission approach.

Some writers and researchers are prepared to associate the mentoring of beginning teachers with reflective and transformational approaches to teacher learning. Marsick and Watkins described this transformational process as one of encountering and delving into the organisational norms and self perceptions which influence the way in which people perceive, question, probe, evaluate, interpret and judge their experiences. Elliot and Calderhead see mentoring as the illumination of the images of teaching that teachers bring to their work, however not all writers have accepted the notion of reflection as a transformative process and one that is central to beginning teacher induction.

Some researchers have observed that high amounts of professional support, including mentoring support, may only serve to entrench the status quo and stifle professional growth. The literature suggests that this is one of the central problems associated with mentoring for beginning teachers and is a recurring aspect of several case studies investigating teachers' induction experiences. Ballantyne et al. went as far as to suggest that mentoring sometimes constrained the learning of beginning teachers rather than facilitated reflective practice.

The effectiveness of multiple mentoring relationships and voluntary mentoring relationships have also been explored in the literature suggesting that the emphasis should be less on the identification of individual mentors and more on the provision of professional environments in which mentoring relationships can emerge.

While mentoring has heavily infused the rhetoric of teacher induction the evidence for its effectiveness has been largely drawn from other fields of study in adult and teacher education. The research reported in this paper draws on this foundation and examines the effectiveness of mentoring in the context of beginning teacher induction.

Summary of findings from the literature

The literature strongly suggests that contextualised learning or workplace learning mediated by mentors has the potential to assist beginning teachers in their development of an appropriate body of practical professional knowledge. The evidence in the literature indicates that workplace learning is a powerful source of learning and change in individuals, groups and organisations. With a constructivist epistemological basis it generates a dynamic, interactive learning process that has the potential to challenge if not transform the status quo. However, learning in the workplace focused on transmission of a defined and immutable body of practitioner knowledge may also serve to severely limit and make parochial, the learning of individuals and entrench existing practice regardless of its effectiveness. Mentoring as a workplace learning strategy for beginning teachers is exposed to the potential of both influences.

Research methodology

Some 1492 beginning teachers were appointed to 735 NSW government schools in 1998. Questionnaires for beginning teachers and their supervisors and mentors were distributed to a sample of 387 schools that reflected the range of school types and distribution of beginning teachers across the 40 administrative districts in the state. The response rate was 57% with usable questionnaires being received from 220 beginning teacher respondents and 245 supervisor and mentor respondents. Survey data were aggregated and analysed using SPSS. Examination of the survey data generated a broad description of induction
practices, including mentoring support, across a large school system and by examining patterns of data, inferences could be drawn about relationships between key variables.

Data were also collected from six case study schools during the course of the year. Case studies provided the opportunities to explore, in specific and different school contexts, the induction practices and conditions contributing to sustained effective induction and beginning teacher learning. The schools and contexts for focus were:

- Menin Road Public School: (one beginning teacher) a large kindergarten to year six (K-6) primary school in a recently developed affluent suburb in Sydney's north.
- Titania Public School: a small K-6 primary school serving a shrinking public housing estate in metropolitan Sydney.
- Hamel Public School: a large K-6 primary school in Sydney's south west with a large and diverse non-English speaking background (NESB) community.
- Pozieres High School: a 7-12 secondary school in Sydney's outer western suburbs.
- Ormond High School: a small 7-12 secondary school in a small rural community.
- Byra Central School: a K-12 school with a very large Aboriginal student population in an isolated community in western NSW.

**Findings from the survey**

More than one third of beginning teacher respondents (35%) indicated that they had a mentor with whom they had developed an informal relationship over time while 16.4% of respondents indicated that they had mentors who were formally designated by the school from the outset. Almost half of respondents (48%) were not able to identify a mentor who was not also the designated supervisor. Overall the data suggested that mentoring relationships were more prevalent than revealed by the supervisor/mentor responses.

Mentors were asked to identify the key factor or combinations of factors that led them to establish mentoring relationships with beginning teachers. More than half thought that they had been selected because of their experience and skills as mentors while contextual factors were the next most prominent reasons identified. These included sharing the same students, classes, grade, classroom proximity, being in the same staffroom and being released from class at the same time.

Analysis of data using Oneway ANOVA revealed that beginning teachers who could identify mentoring relationships judged the professional climate of their schools more favourably than did those beginning teachers who could not identify a mentor ($F=7.74 \ p<.001$).

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to assess the effects of mentoring relationships on two measures of effectiveness and satisfaction - Effectiveness of induction support and Overall satisfaction with the school induction program. Existence of mentoring relationship (three groups - No mentor identified, Informal, Formally designated) was used as the independent variable.

The MANOVA tests yielded significant results on the dependent variables Effectiveness of induction support ($F=15.34 \ p=.000$) and Overall satisfaction with the school induction program ($F=4.68 \ p=.01$). Two a priori comparisons (No mentor with Informal mentor and No mentor with Formally designated mentor) on the two dependent variables supported the hypothesis that the existence of mentoring relationships, in particular formal mentoring relationships, makes a positive difference to the induction experiences of beginning teachers. Beginning teachers who had a formally designated mentor had higher mean ratings on Effectiveness of induction support and Overall satisfaction with school induction support than those with informal mentors or no mentors (see Table 1 and Table 2).
### Table 1 Group means and S.D. Effectiveness of induction support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No mentor</td>
<td>23.18</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal mentor identified</td>
<td>28.89</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally designated mentor</td>
<td>30.10</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For entire sample*</td>
<td>26.67</td>
<td>7.61</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2 Group means and S.D. on Overall satisfaction with school induction support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No mentor</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal mentor identified</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally designated mentor</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For entire sample*</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Findings from the case studies

Four of the six case study schools included mentoring as a key practice in their approaches to beginning teachers' workplace learning. Each of these schools considered that additional support was required to best meet the needs of beginning teachers. The principals in the case study schools thought that it was important to separate the supervisory role from the mentoring role. They regarded mentoring as a strategy to provide professional and personal support to beginning teachers outside the school's line management structure. The emphasis, in their minds, was on support, the provision of an alternative source of practitioner knowledge and the provision of an alternative professional reference point in the school. However, in reality a number of mentoring relationships arose between supervisor and beginning teacher. Beginning teachers sometimes identified their supervisors as their mentors. Being a supervisor did not preclude adoption of the mentoring role.

At Pozieres High School the mentoring program for beginning teachers was an extension of a long standing approach to teacher professional development and a strategy for the reinforcement, renewal and articulation of the school's professional ethos. The principal of Pozieres High School observed that the mentor program was at least six years old and that it reflected the caring nature of the school towards its students and staff:
It's a legacy of looking after beginning teachers for many years (Carol, principal 16/3/98).

At Hamel Public School the use of mentors served as an important form of support for beginning teachers and, as at Pozieres High School, reinforced the ethos or professional culture of the school. Two of the mentors were also the beginning teachers’ supervisors. Other mentoring relationships emerged from within grade teams. In this large primary school the formation of grade teams was influenced by consideration of relationships between teachers and their potential to reinforce the professional ethos at Hamel. Mentoring was linked to the grade team structure:

You can appoint mentors for induction and professional development but the success of the process is dependent upon the alignment of the views and practices of these mentors with the culture of the school (Jeff, principal 9/6/98).

This principal viewed the development of a shared understanding of the school's professional ethos amongst staff and particularly amongst mentors, as critical to the school's approach to teacher professional development. While mentoring was a key practice in school based induction at Hamel the process of mentor selection was not as clearcut. Mentoring relationships were not formally designated by the school although the emergence of these relationships over the course of the first term was an expectation of the principal and school executive. However, the origin of these relationships was not simply left to chance. As indicated previously the construction of grade teams and the allocation of beginning teachers to these teams were deliberate, careful actions. In most instances mentoring relationships emerged from these team contexts.

Mentoring relationships also flourished spontaneously where beginning teachers and other teachers taught similar classes and the same topics and where they collaborated in some of the preparation and teaching. Sometimes mentors drew upon their own experiences of supervision, or lack of it, in determining their support roles for beginning teachers. In one instance, because of this prior experience, the mentor was conscious not to overdo the observation and make the beginning teacher feel that she was being watched on all occasions. Guidance mixed with professional space was the goal. For other mentors, lack of support experienced as a beginning teacher was significant motivation to provide particular types of support - particularly emotional support, logistical support and assistance with classroom management.

Mentoring relationships that developed and strengthened over the course of the year in these case study schools were characterised by strong mutual respect and commitment. Some beginning teachers highlighted the strong personal and professional support provided by their mentors as the reason for their survival and success in the first year.

**Discussion**

**Mentoring and school climate**

The finding from the survey research that there was a significant relationship between having a mentor and beginning teachers’ ratings of school climate extends earlier research by Tellez that suggested the best mentoring relationships emerged from a positive organisational climate in schools. Nevertheless some caution needs to be exercised in relation to this finding. The existence of a supportive school climate might have been a product of the work of key staff such as mentors or alternatively the mentoring relationships
for beginning teachers could have been attributed to the existence of prevailing supportive school climates. The finding is ambiguous.

Because the process of learning to teach in the first year tends to be personally focused, the existence of ‘significant others’ such as mentors may engender favourable interpretations of a complex phenomenon such as school climate. Beginning teacher support is only one dimension of a supportive, positive school climate. It could be argued that the finding reported is predictable. Nevertheless, it provides further insight into the perceptions of beginning teachers and the factors that may have impact on their induction experiences. The finding can be interpreted as supporting one of the broad hypothesis that having a mentor makes a positive contribution to beginning teachers’ induction experiences and the ways they view their work and school environment.

Mentoring and induction

The findings of significant relationships between the existence of a mentor and beginning teachers’ ratings on Effectiveness of induction support and their ratings of Overall satisfaction with induction support from a large sample (N=220) are generalisable to the wider population of beginning teachers. As such they provide an important extension to findings from a number of qualitative research studies reported in the literature.

The numbers of beginning teachers with formal mentors was not large N=36. This may be an indication that the deliberate adoption of workplace learning strategies is not widespread in schools. The large number of beginning teachers who did not identify any mentor (N=107) reinforced this interpretation. It may also be related to a legacy of industrial issues in NSW government schools associated with the roles and responsibilities of Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) who were often assigned mentoring responsibilities. The position of AST was abolished following resolution of a salaries dispute in government schools in 1996.

The larger number of informal mentors identified by beginning teachers (N=77) suggests that mentoring as a workplace learning strategy is not reliant on the establishment of formal structures and designation of pairs of beginning teachers and mentors. Beginning teachers, in schools where there was a prevailing condition of support and collegiality, were able to form valuable professional relationships with more experienced teachers. What the research did not reveal, however, was the degree to which others in the school, such as supervisors and principals, were aware of, and therefore able to support and monitor, these mentoring relationships. As the case study data at Hamel Public School indicated, not all the mentoring relationships that were self-selecting were of equal value, particularly in the eyes of principals and supervisors.

These findings build on research by Bainer and Didham that found there were statistically significant differences on a range of support factors between elementary teachers with and without supportive adult relationships and research by Tellez who found a statistically significant difference between beginning teachers with and without mentors on the amount of help sought.

The findings in relation to mentoring in this study are new in that they extend, through quantitative research methods, the importance of mentoring relationships to the specific context of beginning teacher induction and professional learning. Similarly, the finding in relation to Overall satisfaction with induction support takes further, research by Fagan and Walter that established a significant relationship between people with a mentor (nurses, police and teachers) and higher satisfaction with work. Again, the finding in relation to satisfaction is new in that it extends findings from other research to the field of beginning teacher induction. Fagan and Walter were quick to point out the standard research caveat
that mentoring may not have been the causal factor in the ratings of satisfaction in their research. However, the results from the Fagan and Walter study strengthen the validity and reliability of the finding from this study - that having a mentor as a beginning teacher is likely to contribute to a sense of overall satisfaction with induction experiences.

Identification/ selection of mentors

The case study research provided further insight into the issues of identification and selection of mentors for beginning teachers. The data from both the survey and case study research indicated that as far as beginning teachers were concerned, critical ingredients in effective mentoring relationships were the availability of the mentor, and whether they were approachable, friendly, open and actively interested in the development of their beginning teachers. These findings are consistent with the concept of psychosocial support as a key to effective mentoring.

Some writers and researchers have proposed that age/experience differences between mentors and beginning teachers should not be too great. The evidence from the case studies is ambivalent. At least one mentor and two principals observed that the relative youth of the whole staff and mentor teachers' abilities to recall what it was like to be a beginning teacher, the ability to empathise, were important conditions that contributed to effective mentoring and school based induction. Yet in some cases larger differences in age and experience between mentors and beginning teachers were no impediment to successful and lasting relationships. The survey data nevertheless did indicate that mentors were much more likely to have fewer years experience and hence be closer in age to beginning teachers, than supervisors.

Rather than age and status, the physical location of mentors in relation to beginning teachers and their general availability to beginning teachers appeared to have considerable bearing on the formation of effective mentoring relationships. Teachers in adjacent classrooms, or in the same staffrooms, teaching the same group of students or same grade, were more likely to end up as mentors. Some schools took advantage of this tendency and managed the organisation of grade teams and the allocation of classes with their beginning teachers and preferred mentors in mind. While mentoring relationships could be said to have emerged informally, the reality was that astute supervisors and principals contrived to make these relationships more likely to emerge.

The case study findings suggest that the mentoring relationships were more likely to be effective for a longer period of time if the process of establishing the relationship was by choice rather than formal assignment. Interpersonal dynamics are important factors in effective mentoring. The vulnerability that beginning teachers felt, needed to be managed with considerable sensitivity. The relationships that flourished in the case study schools were characterised by this sensitivity together with mentor energy and availability. Mentors were active agents in assisting and making suggestions without dominating or imposing. Several mentors became good friends with their beginning teachers.

Nevertheless, relationships that were formally assigned were also successful. Again, sensitivity combined with active assistance and provision of support contributed to the effectiveness of these relationships. At Byra Central School and Pozieres High School the assignment of mentors followed beginning teachers' initial visits to the school and a preliminary appraisal of their individual needs. This process of matching was an attempt to increase the likelihood of successful mentoring relationships being established.
Characteristics of effective mentoring relationships

For beginning teachers critical ingredients to effective mentoring relationships were the availability of the mentors, and whether they were approachable, friendly, open and actively interested in the development of their beginning teachers. The research suggests that the separation of mentor and supervisor roles is less critical than the degree of personal compatibility between beginning teacher and mentor. The personal qualities of both mentor and beginning teacher and their interpersonal compatibility appear to be important factors contributing to effective mentoring relationships during induction. In summary an effective mentor for a beginning teacher, is most likely to be a teacher, more experienced than the inductee, who:

- can empathise with the circumstances of the beginning teacher and can provide psycho-social support
- teaches close by
- shares the same students and/or teach the at the same class level
- is regarded as an exemplary teacher by others
- is friendly and approachable
- is the same gender as the beginning teacher
- is capable of initiating and fostering collaborative enquiry and reflection on practice and thus conceptualises teacher learning as moving beyond transmission and incorporating transactional and transformational processes.

Mentor training/professional learning

The provision of effective induction support by supervisors and mentors may be enhanced by a reappraisal of the professional learning opportunities open to these key personnel. The literature often makes reference to the need for training of mentors. Because mentoring is a highly contextually learning strategy there are limits to what might be regarded as constituting relevant and effective generic training. The issue is further complicated by the term 'training' which tends to imply the delivery of predefined and decontextualised skills. However, mentors come to the role with a wide range of professional experience and, consequently, they have different needs and expectations. An alternate approach is to provide opportunities for mentors to meet and engage in a professional dialogue focused on professional practice and the development of new understandings about learning and teaching. Such a model has been used at the University of East Anglia in work with mentors of beginning teachers, and in a pilot mentor professional learning program developed jointly by the NSW DET Training and Development Directorate and Charles Sturt University.

Such an approach recognises the existing body of professional knowledge residing within mentors, and involves a collaborative reappraisal of this knowledge and its relevance to their own and their beginning teachers' practice. Furthermore, the relative professional isolation of teachers in schools and classrooms means that experienced teachers often value opportunities to learn about professional practice elsewhere and to make comparisons with their own experience and practice. This requires collaboration in the development of shared understanding of, and insight into, induction and teacher competence. The same challenge confronts those responsible for school based components of teacher education. Conceptualising the issue as one of training may not be as productive or professionally liberating as providing opportunities for, and facilitating, professional dialogue and reflection amongst mentor teachers.

Overall, the findings from this study, while reaffirming those reported in the literature, provided new insights into effective induction practices and the important place of mentoring in the process of becoming a teacher. Beginning teachers had a high regard for mentors’
professional expertise, assistance and support and mentors were valued for providing personal practical knowledge and situationally specific assistance in a diversity of teaching roles. The written comments on questionnaires and the case study data reinforced claims made in the literature regarding the value that beginning teachers placed on emotional or psychosocial support from colleagues. This study clearly establishes mentoring as a very important and effective practice in school based induction and a strong influence on teacher learning.

However, the case studies revealed that distinctions could be made between the nature of this learning. The most effective professional learning occurred where mentoring was employed in combination with other forms of induction support to facilitate autonomous action and reflection, complemented and tempered by collaborative endeavour and reflection on practice. Effective mediated workplace learning involves transactional and transformational processes and outcomes of teacher learning. This is in contrast to learning in the workplace conceptualised as a peripheral and incidental outcome of teachers' work or learning that focuses on transmission and reinforcement of the professional status quo.

Conclusion

The research firmly establishes that mentoring relationships make very important contributions to the induction experiences of beginning teachers. This study significantly extends the research knowledge base related to the importance of mentoring, particularly formal mentoring relationships, in effective school based induction practice. The study confirms findings from other research in relation to the effectiveness of mentoring as a workplace learning strategy. The significance that beginning teachers place upon the support provided by their more experienced colleagues suggests that the design of effective school based induction programs should include mentoring support and greater commitment to clinical and developmental approaches to supervision for beginning teachers.

There is a dilemma faced by principals and administrators in providing early mentoring support to beginning teachers to complement the role of supervisors. The findings in this study suggest that the mentoring relationships designated by principals and others required prior knowledge of, and meetings with each beginning teacher. Unfortunately the appointment process and school circumstances do not always permit this to occur. An effective alternative strategy adopted in one case study school was for the principal and supervisors to give very careful consideration to the allocation of classes and the assignment of teachers to grade teams. The purpose of this exercise was to maximise beginning teachers' exposure to positive professional role models who also had a predisposition to work as mentors. In this approach the formation of professional relationships was not mandatory or designated, but it generated effective mentoring and supervisory support for beginning teachers.

The wider adoption of mentoring and related support practices in schools may require a reappraisal of the role of the teacher in relation to teacher education and professional development and a reconsideration of the concept of professionalism in teaching. The findings in relation to effective school based induction practice, challenge strongly, the isolation and privatism that has traditionally characterised the teaching profession and teaching practice under the guise of professional autonomy. There is little doubt that the widespread provision of effective induction support by supervisors and mentors, together with the provision of training and development for these key personnel, is related to the issues of leadership development, school development and the fostering of school environments that value teacher enquiry and learning. Workplace learning restricted to simple hierarchical apprenticeship serves only to replicate the past and reinforce the conservatism and conformism that has characterised pedagogy in many schools. Mentoring
relationships that promote collaborative enquiry, cooperative practice and reflection are fundamental to workplace learning for beginning teachers that moves beyond the transmission of past and existing practice. The development and growth of beginning teachers through mentoring practices that promote transactional and transformational learning provides an important foundation for the enhancement of professionalism in teaching.

References