Mentoring for in-service teachers in a distance teacher education programme: views of mentors, mentees and university teachers

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Abstract This study explores the views of mentoring held by mentors, mentees and university teachers in a distance education programme for in-service teacher education offered by the Open University of Hong Kong. Ten pairs of mentors and mentees and three university teachers participated in in-depth individual interviews designed to explore their views of mentoring with respect to five aspects: mentor roles and responsibilities; mentor-mentee relationships; mentoring programmes; mentor preparation; and school-university relationships. The findings show that mentors, mentees and university teachers held different views of mentoring and that the impact of mentoring on the mentees was different from what the University had expected.

Introduction
Since the 1980s, mentoring has become a core component in teacher induction in the U.S., sparked by concerns about the problems faced by beginning teachers during the early stages of their careers and the high attrition rate of these early career teachers (Serpell, 2000; Wonjonwski, Bellamy & Cooke, 2003). Similarly, in the U.K., the trend towards school-based teacher preparation in initial teacher education during the 1980s has contributed to the popular use of the term “mentoring” to signify the appointment of experienced teachers to undertake the supervision of novice teachers during their teaching practice in schools (McIntyre, Hagger & Wilkin, 1993; Wilkin, 1992). Although mentoring has been increasingly recognized as an important aspect of the professional preparation of teachers, there is still a lack of consensus in the literature on what mentoring is. It should be noted that how mentoring is viewed bears important implications for how mentoring is to be practised and experienced. In addition, the bulk of extant research and discussion on mentoring has been situated in the context of initial teacher education and little has been done on in-service teacher education, let alone in-service teacher education presented in a distance mode.

The present study explores the views of mentoring held by mentors, mentees and university teachers in a distance education programme for in-service teacher education offered by the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK). This study is significant in the following ways. First, views of mentoring held by the different parties concerned will shape the character of the mentor-mentee relationship, which will affect the mentoring experience for the beginning teachers concerned and the quality of beginning teacher learning. Second, the study will contribute to a better understanding of mentoring in the context of in-service teacher education and provide important information for the future improvement of the OUHK mentoring scheme. Third, with the proposed teacher registration requirements in Hong Kong that place a heavy emphasis on the role of mentoring in beginning teacher induction, there is a critical need for information on views of mentoring held by different stakeholders to facilitate dialogue with teachers and schools and to build a common vision of mentoring.

Understanding mentoring
A review of the mentoring literature in the field of teacher education shows that there is no agreed conceptualization of mentoring among teacher educators and educational
researchers (e.g., Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Galvez-Hjornevik, 1986; Gehrke, 1988; Healy & Welchert, 1990; Little, 1990; Merriam, 1983; Roberts, 2000; Walker, 1992; Wojnowski, Bellamy & Cooke, 2003). Roberts (2000) described mentoring as a complex, social and psychological phenomenon. The lack of consensus as to what constitutes mentoring may be a result of writers attempting to focus on different dimensions of mentoring. In the light of the current mentoring literature, it is found that mentoring has been conceptualized with respect to its relational, developmental and contextual dimensions. It should be noted that the dimensional grouping is based on the relative importance a certain conceptualization attaches to each of the dimensions.

Some writers emphasize the relational dimension of mentoring and focus primarily on the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. A good example of the relational perspective is Nathalie Gehrke’s (1988) conceptualization of mentoring—a deep relationship between the mentor and the protégé, which involves the mentor passing on the gift of wisdom to the protégé. The gift of wisdom, as Gehrke described, “comes from having lived and thought deeply” and “it permeates all the mentor does with the protégé” (p. 192). To Gehrke, mentoring as “gift giving” is composed of four characteristic phases: the mentor creating the gift; the protégé awakened from being given the mentor’s gift of wisdom; the protégé committed to labour to achieve a personal transformation; and the protégé becoming a mentor and passing the gift on to a new recipient. Similarly, Galvez-Hjornevik (1986) emphasized voluntary, deep and nurturing mentor-protégé relationships as central to mentoring.

Others emphasize the developmental dimension of mentoring and focus on mentoring functions and behaviours aimed at promoting the professional and/or personal development of both the mentor and the mentee. The developmental perspective is exemplified by Healy and Welchert’s (1990) conceptualization of mentoring—as “a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé) aimed at promoting the career development of both” (p.17). McIntyre and Hagger’s (1993) and Maynard and Furlong’s (1993) views of mentoring—with their common focus on beginning teacher development—also exemplify the developmental perspective. McIntyre and Hagger (1993) distinguished between three versions of mentoring, based on levels of expertise offered by mentors. In a minimal version of mentoring, mentors provide ordinary supervision to beginning teachers to develop their knowledge and skills. In a developed version of mentoring, mentors help beginning teachers reflect on their ideas and practices, share their ideas and experience with beginning teachers, and advise on beginning teachers’ practices. In an extended version of mentoring, beginning teacher learning is extended beyond classroom teaching to issues of whole-school and community concerns. Maynard and Furlong (1993) identified three models of mentoring, which correspond to the changing needs of trainee teachers in practice situations. The apprenticeship model comes in the early stage of practical teaching, in which trainee teachers work alongside mentors who act as a models and interpreters to help the trainees “see” the complexity of the teaching process. The competency model comes in the second stage of practical teaching, in which mentors take on the role of trainers or instructors to engage the trainees in a more systematic training programme that involves routines of observation and feedback on agreed competences. The reflective model comes in the final stage of practical teaching, in which mentors take on the role of co-enquirers to promote critical reflection on teaching and learning in the trainees.
Still others emphasize the contextual dimension of mentoring and focus on the importance of recognizing the powerful influence of the school organization and culture on teacher learning. A good example is the view of “induction as an enculturation process” advanced by Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2003). Feiman-Nemser contended that the learning needs of beginning teachers—which embrace “issues of curriculum, instruction, assessment, management, school culture, and the larger community” (p. 26)—arise from particular contexts of teaching and therefore have to be addressed within the relevant contexts. Along the same line, Feiman-Nemser suggested that mentoring should be “linked to a vision of good teaching, guided by an understanding of teacher learning, and supported by a professional culture that favours collaboration and inquiry” (p. 1). The conceptualization of mentoring as enculturation suggests that mentoring is about helping novice teachers fit into the organization and culture of a particular school community, which is best to be achieved through a whole-school approach in providing or maximizing learning opportunities for these novice teachers in specific contexts. With its emphasis on professional collaboration, this conceptualization recognizes the potential of mentoring for contributing to teacher learning across all experience levels—from novice to experienced teachers.

The review of literature provides a preliminary framework for examining views of mentoring held by key players in the OUHK mentoring scheme—namely, mentors (experienced teachers), mentees (in-service teachers), and university teachers. The present study will shed light on an integrated understanding of the dynamic interaction between mentors, mentees and university teachers in determining the quality of beginning teacher learning in practice situations. This integrated understanding will provide insights on what constitute productive learning experiences for in-service teachers and how teacher education providers and schools may collaborate to contribute to such experiences.

The inquiry of key players’ views on mentoring

The research setting

The present study was conducted in the context of a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme for serving primary school teachers in Hong Kong, who held a university degree but had not undertaken any teacher training. The PGDE programme provided these in-service teachers with initial teacher training and it was presented in a distance mode.

The OUHK has included a mentoring scheme in the PGDE programme so that schools can play a role in teacher preparation (Open University of Hong Kong, 2002). In the mentoring scheme, schools with OUHK PGDE students are invited to nominate experienced teachers as mentors to provide support and guidance to OUHK PGDE students during their teaching practice. Teaching practice takes place throughout a school year, during which University supervisors will arrange two visits to each student’s classroom for summative teaching practice assessments. A university publication entitled *Guidelines on Mentoring* provides training to mentors in a distance mode. Mentors are expected to: (a) provide feedback to mentees on their teaching performance; (b) allow mentees to observe their practices and learn from them; (c) facilitate reflective practice in mentees; and (d) engage mentees in collaborative activities. The overall goal of mentoring is to help mentees to become
reflective practitioners, who have a good level of professional knowledge and expertise in teaching.

Data collection
The participants in the present study were ten OUHK PGDE students from eight primary schools in Hong Kong, ten mentors who were involved in mentoring the ten PGDE students, and three university teachers who were involved in coordinating the delivery of courses in the PGDE programme. All the mentors were experienced teachers, with over ten years of teaching experience and holding various senior positions—-as subject heads, division heads, or vice-principals—and they worked in the same schools as their mentees.

Data were collected by semi-structured interviews conducted individually with the participants. Interview questions were designed to explore the participants’ views on various aspects of mentoring for in-service teachers, including roles and responsibilities, mentor selection and training, mentor-mentee relationships, the mentoring programme, and school-university relationships. Some of the questions raised general issues about the nature of mentoring, while others related specifically to the participants’ roles in the OUHK mentoring scheme, though even here the discussion sometimes raised wider issues and/or drew on other experience.

Data analysis
Data analysis was guided by the research question, “How do key players in the OUHK mentoring scheme view mentoring for in-service teachers?” It started with an inclusive reading, which gave the researcher a feel for the data. The formal process of data analysis started with the second inclusive reading of the data. The researcher brought to this second reading sensitizers that included the different dimensions of mentoring identified in the review of literature.

In the second reading of the data, the researcher colour-coded words, sentences, lines and paragraphs that might form multiple categories and tried to build up tentative categories. The tentative categories were constantly compared and contrasted in an effort to find connections, patterns, prominent ideas and puzzling exceptions; and the categories were modified as coding went along. Guided by the research question in reading the data, the researcher thought through the connections among the categories to come up with major themes that emerged from the data.

Mentors’ views–collegial mentoring for professional socialization
Teaching-practice mentoring (called TP mentoring hereafter) was not a common practice among mentors of OUHK PGDE students. Only some mentors reported that they had practised TP mentoring in accordance with the University’s Guidelines on Mentoring. In most instances, these mentoring efforts were task-oriented, provided to in-service teachers before their teaching practice assessments, and aimed at helping them do well in these assessments. TP mentoring, therefore, occurred occasionally and involved single lessons. For example, Mentor-1 described her OUHK mentoring responsibilities as tasks to be completed and she did not consider it one of her responsibilities to follow up on her mentee’s studies at the University in order to help her mentee bring theory and practice together.
I have not spent too much extra time undertaking mentoring that is specifically related to my mentee’s teaching practice. I feel that I have finished a task and I have not followed up on her studies at the University afterwards. So I feel that I only spent time on those teaching-practice-related mentoring tasks. (Mentor-1)

Mentor-2 usually prepared her mentee for teaching practice assessments. Her mentoring practices were task-oriented and mostly pre-lesson in nature, targeted at helping her mentee prepare for lessons to be assessed. In this connection, she would focus on assessing the feasibility of the mentee’s lesson planning, such as whether the amount of content to be covered and choice of pupil activities were appropriate.

My role as a mentor is to help my mentee pass in the teaching practice assessment. So before her teaching practice assessment, I focus on helping her prepare for that particular lesson. (Mentor-2)

Mentors generally perceived that the in-service teachers under their guidance had teaching experience, though of varying degrees, in particular school contexts and had attained basic competences in teaching there. Thus, they queried the necessity of TP mentoring for in-service teachers, which, in their view, was mostly concerned with initial occupational induction and the development of basic teaching competences.

This study reveals that schools had developed their own mentoring programmes to cater for the needs of their new recruits. These school-initiated and led mentoring programmes generally involved both initial induction—with experienced teachers providing new recruits with a general orientation to the school and their daily administrative and teaching duties—and continuing interaction and exchange between experienced and novice teachers in teacher development activities, such as collaborative lesson planning and peer lesson observations. This is exemplified by the comments below by the mentor in School-5:

Guidance and support to new teachers comes in two areas: class duties and subject teaching. At the start of a new academic year, school administrators or other senior teachers will work alongside new class teachers individually for the first week to familiarize them with the duties of class teachers, such as taking roll calls. On the subject level, mentoring takes the form of collaborative lesson planning throughout the school year. Teachers of the same subject and grade level meet to plan lessons on a unit basis. (Mentor-5)

School-led mentoring also took place informally between colleagues anytime during the school day and anywhere on the school premises in response to needs which arose. For example, Mentor-2 provided mentoring support to her mentee in their ordinary daily conversations:

We sit opposite to each other in the staffroom. Sometimes we talk about wider educational issues, but just casually. We have casual conversations all the time. I share with her difficulties I met in teaching a lesson—for example, a song with very high notes—and draw her attention to that particular lesson. Or sometimes I will talk to her about troublemakers in a particular class. (Mentor-2)

In this study, mentors generally felt that mentoring support for in-service teachers had already been covered by school-led mentoring programmes, thus making TP mentoring a rather redundant arrangement. This view was supported by the finding that mentors generally did not see the teaching practice as having a significant impact on the nature and frequency of their interactions with the mentees, and that the relationship with their mentees was best described as “collegial”. For instance, Mentor-4 perceived her mentee as an “insider” with knowledge of the school’s usual practices, routines and expectations in regard to the quality of teaching and learning,
and described her way of relating to her mentee as “a collegial relationship rather than a mentoring relationship.”

Mentors’ perceptions of their major responsibilities show that they were concerned with facilitating mentees’ personal professional growth and helping them become valued members of the school community who could contribute to its long-term development. Their concern went beyond facilitating skill development (e.g., classroom skills, skills of relating to students, parents and colleagues) in their mentees to a broader focus on facilitating other aspects of their professional development. For example, both Mentor-6 and Mentor-8 were concerned with helping their mentees understand the nature of the teaching profession and clarify their beliefs and values and personal goals, and engaging them in reflection on their practices and wider issues in education. Mentor-7 emphasized the mentors’ role in providing professional learning opportunities for both the mentee and the mentor, which, together, would help bring about school improvement. His mentoring practice focused on helping his mentee master practical skills of teaching and integrate with the school culture; facilitating his mentee’s professional advancement; and engaging his mentee in reflecting on his beliefs and values, and his personal goals in being a teacher.

As a mentor, I help my mentee develop skills of classroom teaching. At the same time, I help my mentee advance professionally. I encourage my mentee to widen his exposure and better equip himself for the profession. I hope to help my mentee understand his roles and responsibilities as a teacher and the personal qualities required of teachers.
(Mentor-7)

Descriptions of mentor-mentee interaction in the interviews show that mentors were mostly involved in: sharing experiences with mentees; engaging mentees in reflective activities; offering emotional support; helping mentees develop teaching skills; allowing mentees to observe their lessons; and discussing with mentees wider issues in education. These findings corroborate the mentors’ views on their major responsibilities in mentoring—to help their mentees develop the practical skills of teaching and provide a caring and supportive learning environment for their personal professional development. However, mentors were rarely engaged in helping mentees master subject content knowledge; in engaging in collaborative teaching activities with mentees; and in helping mentees relate theory and practice. This suggests that mentors generally perceived these activities to fall outside the scope of their responsibilities.

Under ideal circumstances (e.g., sufficient time availability), mentors felt that mentoring should involve more mentor-mentee interactions to help mentees develop their teaching skills through professional collaboration and to engage them in reflective activities in a caring and supportive learning environment. Interestingly, professional collaboration was one of the activities that mentors and mentees were least engaged in, but it was among mentors’ priority mentoring activities under ideal conditions.

Mentees’ views–developing a partnership with mentors

Mentees received support from their mentors before and during their teaching practice. Before the teaching practice, mentees met with their mentors to discuss arrangements related to their teaching practice and exchange ideas and experiences on classroom teaching. For instance, some mentors offered suggestions to their mentees on lesson planning and classroom management in these initial meetings. On the
whole, mentees found that such exchanges helped them deal with problems that came up in teaching.

During the teaching practice, mentoring took place in both a formal and informal manner. At a formal level, teaching-practice mentoring involved observation of mentees’ lessons by mentors, pre-lesson conferences between mentees and mentors to discuss the planning and delivery of lessons to be observed, and post-lesson conferences between the two parties to discuss mentees’ teaching performance in the observed lessons. Mentoring also took place informally in the form of ordinary daily conversations between mentees and mentors during the school day in response to needs which arose.

In this study, lesson observations by mentors were infrequent. All of the ten mentees reported that they had post-lesson discussions with their mentors, and only four reported that they had pre-lesson discussions with their mentors. This suggests that mentees and mentors attached more importance to post-lesson conferences to discuss mentees’ teaching performance and pupil responses in observed lessons. Post-lesson discussions focused mainly on two areas: teaching methods and classroom management. On the whole, mentees found that lesson observations by mentors and pre- and post-lesson discussions were necessary, which could help develop their competences in teaching. In particular, they found post-lesson discussions to be essential, as they could know their mistakes and learn how to improve their teaching. For instance, Mentee-1 expressed that she had learned a lot about time management and class management from her mentor:

My mentor shared with me how to manage the discussion time for group activities. She told me that I had to explain the procedures clearly to my pupils so that they would know exactly how I was going to do it. She suggested that I wrote down the amount of time left on the board—for example, “5 minutes,” “1 minute,” and “0 minute” to indicate the end of an activity. She said that with time, pupils would get into a routine of stopping their activity when they saw “0 minute” on the board. I tried this in my teaching and it was very successful. (Mentee-1)

Also, Mentee-4 obtained useful advice from her mentor on how to use a microphone properly in class:

I was not aware that I spoke too loudly to the microphone and that it would hurt pupils’ ears. I thought that pupils at the back did not hear me. My mentor alerted me to the problem. (Mentee-4)

Descriptions of mentor-mentee interaction in the interviews show that mentoring support mostly involved mentors sharing experiences with mentees; helping mentees develop teaching skills; allowing mentees to observe their lessons; and offering emotional support. However, mentors were rarely engaged in helping mentees master subject content knowledge; in engaging mentees in reflective activities; and in helping mentees relate theory and practice. When asked the kinds of mentoring support they needed most, mentees felt that mentoring should focus on engaging them in reflective activities and on helping them relate theory and practice—the most neglected areas in actual mentoring activities. In addition, mentees found mentors’ emotional support to be important.

Mentees perceived that the major responsibility of mentors was to provide support and guidance to their mentees. More specifically, mentors should play an active role in providing objective and professional advice to mentees, facilitating mentees’ personal development, showing concern about mentees’ adjustment to the job of teaching, and helping mentees get used to the school environment.
Mentees considered that their own major responsibilities included taking the initiative in consulting their mentors, preparing well for lessons, engaging in reflection about their practice, and keeping an open mind about others’ comments, ideas or suggestions. For instance, Mentee-1 felt that she needed to be reflective about her practice and that mentors’ advice provided her with the direction for improvement:

My mentor shows me the path. I have to walk on my own and keep exploring how to improve myself. (Mentee-1)

To most mentees, their mentors were currently acting as “advisors” and “instructors.” When asked about their conception of ideal mentor roles, most wanted their mentors to be “partners”—a role seldom played by mentors currently.

In addition, mentees perceived mentoring in terms of its benefits and costs for both mentors and mentees. Mentees generally felt that mentors could benefit from mentoring. In working with beginning teachers, they gained exposure to new teaching ideas and new teaching materials, which would make them more susceptible to educational changes. The opportunities to work and communicate with beginning teachers enhanced mentors’ understanding of the development needs of novice teachers. The mentoring experience also enhanced mentors’ skills in carrying out lesson observations and holding discussions with mentees. Further, professional collaboration between mentors and mentees would benefit pupil learning. For instance, Mentee-8 worked closely with his mentor to deal with pupils’ discipline problems cooperatively:

I often talk with my mentor on how to deal with pupils’ discipline problems. We share a belief that we need to establish rapport with those problem pupils in order to help them. We play the role of social workers. We talk to them. (Mentee-8)

Almost all mentees reported that they had benefited from mentoring. First, the guidance and support provided by their mentors enhanced their professional development, especially their teaching skills. Second, the mentoring experience promoted reflection on their practice, especially in the areas of lesson planning and lesson delivery, which had contributed to improvement in their teaching performance. Third, mentors, who had better understanding of mentees’ needs and were designated to provide assistance and support, became mentees’ first ports of call when they encountered problems in their work. Fourth, mentors, who were experienced teachers in particular school contexts and possessed relevant contextual knowledge and experience, facilitated mentees’ induction into the teaching profession and the school environment.

My mentor has helped me integrate into the working environment of this school. Without him, it will take a longer time for me to settle in to my job. He has also drawn my attention to new teaching ideas, which has helped me improve my teaching. (Mentee-7)

In terms of costs, time was the biggest concern for mentors. Extra time and effort was involved in mentoring and yet taking up the mentorship role did not result in reduced workload for mentors. Mentee-5 pointed out that her mentor was so occupied with administrative duties that they barely had time to engage in mentoring activities:

The problem is my mentor is often so tied up with work that I barely have a chance to consult her. She can hardly spare time for mentoring. (Mentee-5)
Mentors were generally unclear about what the OUHK expected of them and the roles and responsibilities of mentors. As a result, mentors sometimes had no idea of what to do for their mentees.

To some mentees, heavy workload and shortage of time had restrained them from approaching their mentors regularly. Some mentees also found the lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities for mentors and mentees to be problematic.

The guideline is insufficient. I only know that a mentor has been assigned to me. But I don’t know the mentor’s role and responsibilities. (Mentee-9)

Taken together, mentees viewed mentoring as support provided by mentors to facilitate the professional development of beginning teachers and they focussed mainly on the interaction between mentors and mentees. However, the kinds of support considered to be most needed by mentees—engaging in reflection and relating theory and practice—did not correspond with the kinds of support considered to be important and provided most often by mentors in actual mentoring practices. In addition, the kind of mentor-mentee relationship that mentees found to be most desirable—“partners”—did not match with the roles currently played by their mentors—“advisors” and “instructors.”

University teachers’ views—maturing into professionals in context

University teachers emphasized the importance of promoting teacher learning within particular contexts of teaching. University Teacher-1 held the view that beginning teacher learning could be promoted if experienced teachers who worked in the same schools as the beginning teachers provided them with support and guidance in their efforts to bring theory and practice together.

Different schools have different micro-environments. We hope that mentors can help our PGDE students apply the theoretical knowledge they learned in university courses in their particular school contexts. (University Teacher-1)

Both University Teacher-2 and University Teacher-3 emphasized the importance of addressing the learning needs of beginning teachers within particular contexts of teaching. University Teacher-2 found it crucial that beginning teachers had opportunities to observe the practices of their experienced colleagues and learn from them. Similarly, to University Teacher-3, the support and guidance provided to beginning teachers should correspond with actual practices in relation to teaching and learning in particular school contexts.

Although the OUHK mentoring scheme is an initiative of the University, university teachers generally thought that in-service teachers were already serving teachers and therefore mentoring for these teachers could be part of schools’ own staff development efforts to develop their teaching staff.

In the OUHK mentoring scheme, we invite schools to nominate experienced teachers to provide support and guidance to our PGDE students during their teaching practice. We are mainly using the schools’ own mentoring resources—members of their teaching staff will take up the mentorship role. (University Teacher-2)

Schools are committed to developing their new teachers because, in the long run, they will become important assets of these schools. (University Teacher-1)

Thus, university teachers generally perceived the mentor-mentee relationship as collegial and emphasized experience sharing as an important form of communication between experienced teachers and their mentees.
The document *Guidelines on Mentoring* analyzes the concept of mentoring and details the University’s expectations of mentors’ roles and responsibilities. According to the university teachers, the document was never intended to be directive. In fact, the University adopted a laissez-faire approach to managing the mentoring scheme. This may be attributed to the view held by university teachers that mentoring should address the learning needs of beginning teachers that arise from particular contexts of teaching and therefore it should be allowed to develop within the relevant contexts.

Taken together, university teachers viewed mentoring as promoting teacher learning within particular contexts of teaching and they emphasized that mentoring should be taken as a shared responsibility among members of a school community.

**An evolving tripartite relationship**

In the OUHK mentoring scheme, mentors, mentees and the University enter into a tripartite relationship. To attain a common vision on mentoring for in-service teachers, a shared understanding of the underlying rationale of the mentoring scheme, clarity of what the scheme involves and how it works, and a sense of ownership among those involved are crucial for the growth of this relationship. As shown in this study, key players in the OUHK mentoring scheme viewed mentoring for in-service teachers differently. Their responses show that mentors emphasized the developmental dimension of mentoring (i.e., professional socialization); mentees focussed on its relational dimension (i.e., mentor-mentee interaction); and university teachers were concerned with its contextual dimension (i.e., teacher learning in a school community). Apparently, mentors, mentees and the University had not attained a common vision on mentoring for in-service teachers. In addition, mentors and mentees were generally unclear about the OUHK mentoring scheme, in particular the University’s expectations of their roles and responsibilities.

As mentors of OUHK PGDE students, they were trained in a distance mode through the document *Guidelines on Mentoring*, which analyses the concept of mentoring and details the University’s expectations of their roles and responsibilities. Mentors who reported that they had not practised TP mentoring were generally unclear about what the OUHK expected of them and felt that they had not fulfilled the University’s requirements. This aspect of the study reveals that most mentors had not gone through the *Guidelines* thoroughly so that, in many instances, mentors and the University did not have a shared understanding of the mentoring scheme and of mentors’ roles and responsibilities.

There also appeared to be a missing link between mentors and the University, as shown by the lack of reference to the University in mentors’ interview data, and the view generally expressed by mentors that the current school-University relationships tended to be very loose and distant. Nearly all mentors had no previous direct contact with the University and had not formally met the University supervisors when they came to their schools for supervisory visits. Some mentors felt that stronger school-University relationships would benefit the professional development of their mentees, for example, through holding tripartite conferences between a mentee, a mentor and a University supervisor to discuss and provide feedback on the teaching performance of the mentee. Other mentors argued that schools could only benefit from such stronger relationships if they had access to the University’s resources— for example, through collaborating with University academic staff on school development projects.

On the whole, mentees perceived the University as a provider of learner support, which took the forms of self-instructional study materials, assignments that engaged
them in reflection, supervisory visits by University teachers, and online discussion. Interestingly, no mentees mentioned the appointment of mentors as a kind of learner support provided by the University.

Mentees generally agreed that the learner support provided by the University was useful. In particular, they found the self-contained study materials and the feedback and advice provided by University teachers during supervisory visits to be most useful for their professional preparation. For instance, Mentee-1 found that the advice provided by the University teacher helped her improve her teaching performance:

I find that I benefit most from supervisory visits. The University teacher has showed me how I can apply my knowledge in practice. It is very helpful. (Mentee-1)

In general, mentees felt that stronger school-University relationships would benefit their professional development, for example, through smoother teaching-practice arrangements and easier access to the University’s resources.

The OUHK mentoring scheme has been implemented for 4 years. It takes time for schools and mentors to get familiar with its nuances and technicalities. The development of a relationship is a process—it takes time for a relationship to take shape and mature. The tripartite relationship, in this case, was evolving.

Discussion and conclusion

This study reveals that mentors viewed TP mentoring differently from the University’s expectations. The University expected school mentors to have more involvement and input in TP mentoring, for instance that mentors should play a prominent role in the development of its PGDE students through planned mentoring activities that would help these novice teachers bring theory and practice together and become reflective practitioners. Quite contrary to this expectation, TP mentoring was not a common practice among mentors of OUHK PGDE students. Only some mentors reported that they had practised TP mentoring in accordance with the University’s Guidelines on Mentoring. In most instances, TP mentoring was practised only occasionally—mainly to OUHK PGDE students before their teaching practice assessments, and was limited in scope—mentors rarely engaged in helping OUHK PGDE students relate theory and practice and in involving them in collaborative teaching activities. The current practice of TP mentoring fell short of the University’s expectation, which may be attributed to the lack of a shared vision of the “meaning” of TP mentoring for in-service teachers.

For most teachers, taking up the mentorship role and becoming involved in teacher preparation marks a significant change in their responsibilities. Fullan (1991) pointed out that the key to understanding the worth of particular changes, or to achieving change, involves “the problem of meaning” which is addressed by three change questions: why change, what to change and how to change—and that it is important for people involved in any change to attain a common consensus on these change questions. Apparently, in this study, mentors and the University had not developed a shared understanding of the meaning of TP mentoring for in-service teachers.

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in-service teachers were themselves serving teachers and had already been inducted as members of staff of their schools, and therefore TP mentoring was unnecessary for them. Further, remediation of the theory-practice gap is the essence of school-based teacher preparation (Wilkin, 1992), and the University’s Guidelines do emphasize the importance of helping in-service teachers bring theory and practice together. In their current mentoring practices, mentors were rarely engaged in helping their mentees in this respect. Either this important message about the what of TP mentoring had not got through to these mentors, or if it had, they lacked the knowledge and skills to implement it (the how of TP mentoring). The latter is exemplified by the response of one mentor who indicated that he would like to see the topic of “helping mentees relate theory and practice” included in mentor training programmes.

Overall, these findings suggest that the mode of mentor training undertaken by the OUHK did not provide sufficient opportunities for thorough and in-depth discussion between mentors and University staff in order to attain a shared understanding of the why, what and how of TP mentoring for in-service teachers. Such shared understanding is crucial for mentors to grasp the value of TP mentoring and decide whether or not they would put effort into it—and for them to develop a sense of ownership that will increase their motivation and commitment to making the process a success.

In this study, some mentors queried the necessity of TP mentoring for in-service teachers. However, this paper argues that teaching practice is a special period of time for novice teachers and that TP mentoring plays a crucial role in these teachers’ professional preparation.

Teaching practice is a specially designated period of time for teacher trainees, during which these novice teachers engage in professional preparation through practice, with support and guidance from university teachers and, in most cases, from experienced teachers in placement schools who act as mentors. More importantly, teaching practice provides the necessary contexts for teacher trainees to apply or test out knowledge or ideas acquired in university course work, which will help them bring theory and practice together. Through practice, novice teachers will gradually build up their professional knowledge. Since teaching practice is such an important time for novice teacher learning, novice teachers should be provided with plentiful opportunities to engage in professional learning during teaching practice. Mentoring plays an important role in enhancing novice teachers’ opportunities to learn within the contexts of teaching. In fact, mentoring has long been viewed as an important component of beginning teacher induction (Serpell, 2000). In making a case for mentoring for beginning teachers, Danielson (1999) critically reviewed the challenges facing beginning teachers, one of which is to acquire an understanding of contextually relevant pedagogy. Similarly, in addressing the learning needs of new teachers, Feiman-Nemser (2003) pointed out that they need to “learn to teach in a particular context” (p. 26). Teachers’ professional preparation, therefore, has to be achieved through practice within the contexts of teaching. In fact, mentoring has long been viewed as an important component of beginning teacher induction (Serpell, 2000). In making a case for mentoring for beginning teachers, Danielson (1999) critically reviewed the challenges facing beginning teachers, one of which is to acquire an understanding of contextually relevant pedagogy. Similarly, in addressing the learning needs of new teachers, Feiman-Nemser (2003) pointed out that they need to “learn to teach in a particular context” (p. 26). Teachers’ professional preparation, therefore, has to be achieved through practice within the contexts of teaching. TP mentoring provides the most needed opportunities, in terms of time and place, for novice teachers’ professional preparation–novice teachers learn from their experienced colleagues who act as mentors within the contexts of teaching in a designated period of time, in which new teacher learning is legitimized. With the support of mentors, novice teachers’ professional learning opportunities can be maximized, for instance through professional conversations with their mentors that engage them in knowledge construction and reflection and through professional collaboration with these experienced teachers.
The finding that school-led mentoring was a natural occurrence in the participating schools has important implications for the design of TP mentoring programmes for in-service teachers. In facing change, teachers will consider how well the changes relate to their situations, with those perceived as fitting well being more likely to be implemented (Doyle & Ponder, 1978). Another fact is that in-service teachers in the OUHK PGDE programme are themselves serving teachers in particular school contexts. Perhaps, the design of TP mentoring programmes should follow the principle of practicality advanced by Doyle and Ponder (1978)—by integrating TP mentoring within the existing structures, practices and norms of schools. This suggestion is in line with the view of mentoring as enculturation and implies that school-University collaboration needs to be enhanced.

To conclude, the dissonance between mentors’ conceptions and practices of TP mentoring for in-service teachers and the University’s expectations raises important concerns for the further development of the OUHK mentoring system—in particular, to what extent in-service teachers need TP mentoring as they have gone through school-led mentoring programmes, and, as an extension of this, whether in-service teachers should be required to do teaching practice as they are already serving teachers. The implications of these concerns suggest that the University should work with school mentors to clarify and attain a shared understanding of what TP mentoring for serving teachers should be and how to go about it to meet their professional development needs.

One of the ways to achieve a quality teaching force is through the provision of quality teacher education. Part of this teacher preparation lies in teacher trainees’ teaching practice experiences. The quality of support for teacher trainees—both pre-service and in-service—will depend crucially on the work of teachers in the role of mentors (McIntyre, Hagger & Wilkin, 1993). Therefore, the quality of school mentors needs to be assured. This is becoming more important with the trend towards school-based teacher preparation. In view of this, school-initiated and led mentoring programmes offer a distinct potential for improving the quality of teacher preparation. Schools and teacher education institutions should collaborate to address school teachers’ development needs and help schools develop their own mentoring forces, which, taken together, will help schools improve in the longer term.

References


