Becoming an insider: The impact of mentoring on the development of early career teachers

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Abstract
The recent increase in interest in mentoring for early career teachers has been fuelled by the need to provide quality teaching and learning and address the current high attrition rates of teachers in their first years. This paper details a study which tracked 16 early career teachers through their first year of teaching. The teachers and their mentors were interviewed on three occasions in an attempt to provide a clear understanding of how these early career teachers achieve control over their professional growth and the role mentors played in this process. This paper makes use of qualitative data to discuss the nature of mentoring experiences, the skills required, the developing professional relationships and the concerns encountered. The results indicated the mentors in this study used primarily 'humanistic' and 'situated apprentice' (Wang & Odell, 2002) approaches to their mentoring with survival and adaptation to the school being the focus. Little attention was given to challenging early career teachers’ pedagogy or reflection on their teaching. The mentors cited a sense of renewal, increased self efficacy and improved leadership skills as positive personal outcomes from the experience. Suggestions will be made with the view to strengthening early career teacher support and retaining our future educators.

Background
As every teacher knows beginning to teach is a complex and difficult task requiring the novice teacher to make the transition from the role of student to that of an effective practitioner in a very short period of time. For many early career teachers this is a daunting experience as it requires them to undertake the roles and responsibilities expected of an experienced teacher often with the more difficult classes in the harder to staff schools (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Carter & Francis, 2001). The difficulty can be further increased if the teacher has large numbers of students, multiple classes to prepare for and is required to teach in unfamiliar specialisations with little or no support or in culturally diverse populations (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). All of these situations and challenges can put new teachers at risk for early exit from the profession.

DePaul (2000) reports that 22% of teachers in the US leave the teaching profession within the first three years of entry whilst Stephens & Moscowitz (1997) report that attrition rates among teachers in Pacific Rim countries (including Australia) are often five times higher than those of more experienced teachers. Past Australian statistics indicated one in six teachers exited the profession in the first two years of employment (Martinez, 1994). The UK has seen high numbers of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years citing inattention to specific support for newly qualified teachers as reasons given (Williams & Prestage, 2000). This type of data presents a challenge to teacher education institutions, systems and schools to examine some of the reasons for this discontent.

Gold (1996) states that, “Few experiences in life have such a tremendous impact on the personal and professional life of a teacher as does the first year of teaching” (p.548). As early career teachers make this transition into schools they encounter many new challenges, responsibilities and must find a professional place within the school culture (Herbert & Worthy, 2001). These experiences derive from a complex interaction of personal and situational factors which help early career teachers to form a professional identity and construct professional practice with the capacity for continued further professional growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).
Kagan (1992) highlighted some of the common influences on professional growth as the importance of prior knowledge and beliefs, the crucial role of the image of self as a teacher and the major impact of context. Most early career teachers bring to and carry through their preservice teacher education programs, personal beliefs about classrooms, teaching and how it felt to be a student (Lortie, 1975). This knowledge and these beliefs are sometimes unchanged even after years spent in preservice programs where course content is often not seen to be connected to preservice teachers’ experiences in the classroom (Kagan, 1992; Knowles, 1994).

Early career teachers commonly display an unrealistic level of optimism and confidence in their ability to teach on entry to teaching (Pajares, 1992). This optimism and confidence is often challenged in the first few years of teaching, and as stated many new recruits choose an early career exit, citing failure to receive adequate mentoring and supervision, behaviour management, excessive responsibilities, school culture and power relations, and failure to recognise and reward professional growth in the early years of their careers as common concerns faced by beginning teachers (Gitomer, 1999; Lohr, 1999; McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006; McCormack & Gore, 2007; McCormack & Thomas, 2003; Ramsey, 2000).

Traditionally early career teacher induction and teacher professional development have been linked to formal, planned activities which use a deficit model of teacher learning (Guskey, 1986) assuming outside “experts” should train or supply teachers with the knowledge, expertise and resource ideas they lack. However, in recent times there has been a shift from the training approach to early career teachers participating as active learners shaping their development and professional growth through reflective participation and collaboration in both programs and practice ((Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Carke & Hollingsworth, 2002). It has been argued that for early career teachers this type of professional development can be further enhanced when supported by a mentor.

In order to support early career teachers many systems and schools have adopted and encouraged the development of mentoring relationships, both formal and informal, as an approach to teacher professional development. There is a range of definitions of mentoring depending on the use to which it is applied, however, most agree that it is a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between an experienced teacher and a beginner aimed at promoting the career development of both (Healy & Welchert, 1990).

Research in professional development suggests that learning arises from collegiality when teachers talk about their practice frequently, continuously and in a focused way; observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching and reflect; work together to plan, research, design, evaluate and reflect on teaching; and teach each other what they know about teaching (Holliday, 1997). However, if mentoring programs and relationships are to be of value they need to be more than supervision or formal assessment and more about professional learning and development. Instead mentoring of new teachers should be based on a relationship which is established by mutual agreement, undertaken willingly, address the needs of individuals and adopt forms suitable to all and engender feelings of safety and support built on open communication and trust. In addition mentors need to know how to support early career teachers by helping them to “uncover assumptions underlying their current practice and reconstructing the curriculum and teaching practice in the unique context of their teaching” (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 489). In return the early career teacher needs to control and be responsible for their own learning by possessing the motivation and capacity to learn rather than having the relationship imposed on them. The outcomes of effective mentoring programs for early career teachers aim to promote self-esteem and motivation, develop a deep understanding of teaching, foster reflective practice, nurture innovative pedagogy and ‘form an intellectual foundation for their own professional development’ (Wang & Odell, 2002, p. 542).

Many approaches to mentoring have been identified and advocated over the past 30 years with the increased acknowledgment of the value of this type of support for early career teachers. Wang and Odell (2002) undertook an extensive review of the international research related to methods and practice of mentoring and identified three main approaches or perspectives underpinning teacher mentor programs and training. Firstly, the ‘humanistic approach’ requires a mentor to provide support for the early career teacher in overcoming their personal stress and emotional problems with a focus on retaining them in the profession. It focuses on the development of the teacher’s self esteem, confidence and self efficacy by supporting their socialisation into the profession. Mentors who adopt this approach serve as counsellors, are encouraging, non judgemental, good listeners and a good
friend. Although this approach has been successful in reducing attrition it does not guarantee that early career teachers will improve the quality of their teaching and continue their professional growth.

The second perspective commonly used by mentors is the ‘situated apprentice’ approach which focuses on the development of technical knowledge related to aspects of teaching such as classroom management, curriculum and assessment. This is based on the professional experience model and relies on articulation of practical knowledge to the beginning teacher through coaching and demonstration. It has an emphasis on assisting the teachers to deal with the immediate problems and demands of teaching. In doing so it presents a rather narrow, functional view of teaching and often leads to reproduction of the existing standards and mentor expectations with little encouragement to develop alternative approaches to teaching practice (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Gore, Williams & Ladwig, 2006; Wang & Odell, 2002; Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

The final approach is the ‘critical constructivist’ perspective developed in recent years with a focus on generating new ideas and approaches to teaching to meet the challenges of future classrooms rather than maintaining the status quo. This approach encourages reflection, inquiry into their teaching and collaborative problem solving between mentor and early career teacher as to new ways to approach problems, learning and meeting the needs of all students (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This approach has little emphasis on the specific teaching knowledge, strategies and goals and conceptual conflicts faced by beginning teachers as they seek to establish themselves and continue their professional learning.

In addition to the benefits of mentoring for early career teachers, facilitators of mentoring programs and mentors themselves are recognising the substantial benefits derived from the mentoring experience (David, 2000; Holloway, 2000). Studies have shown that mentor teachers have gained professional competence through these experiences in applying cognitive coaching skills with their own students such as listening, questioning, providing feedback and reassessing their classroom management (Clinard & Ariav, 1998). Other positive effects of mentoring on mentors has been the source of new ideas about curriculum and teaching strategies which combined with reflection by both parties can lead to renewal and regeneration of enthusiasm and commitment for teaching. This can have help to build the mentor’s capacity for leadership and recognise their valuable knowledge and expertise in pedagogy (Freiberg, Zbikowski & Ganser, 1996). Finally, the personal psychological benefits for the mentor have been reported as enhancing self esteem and self efficacy, increased confidence and satisfaction in from helping less experienced colleagues (Freiberg et al., 1996).

**Purpose of the study**

This study aimed to investigate the role mentors played in supporting the induction and professional growth of early career teachers during the first year of their teaching. The specific aims of the study were to:

1. identify the roles, approaches and the types of support provided by mentors for early career teachers and how these changed throughout their first year of teaching.
2. investigate the major outcomes of mentoring for both mentor and early career teacher.
3. provide suggestions to improve mentor support for early career teachers.

**Methodology**

The participants in this study were graduates from a large regional university in New South Wales (NSW), Australia who had undertaken a four-year double degree program in primary, secondary or early childhood teaching. A random sample of male and female 2002 graduates from a mix of these programs who gained permanent employment in 2003 in NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) schools in both country and city locations and in early childhood, primary and secondary settings were approached and asked to participate in the study. Twenty graduates were selected with a final group of 16 participating in the study.

The participants were asked to identify a mentor and to complete a journal documenting the first two terms of their induction into teaching. These journals were prepared in a semi-structured format by the researchers and required the participants to reflect on: the context of their school and setting; their
initial teaching experiences; the type of support received from school and mentor; and their professional growth at the end of Term 1, Term 2, and early Term 4, 2003. The journals were collected at the end of Term 1 and Term 2 2003, photocopied and returned to the individual participants. Early in Term 4 2003 the early career teachers and their mentors undertook an individual 40-60 minute interview with a researcher in their school setting. These interviews sought to build upon the journal responses and provide a set of richer narratives concerning their experiences and professional learning in learning to teach.

The interviews used standardised semi-structured open-ended questions allowing the researchers to collect evidence regarding the main issues that are of key relevance to the focus of the study. Both the early career teachers and the mentors were given a brief overview of the questions which would guide the interview in advance to ensure that the interviews focused on research areas and to encourage extended thought about the designated discussion issues. The interviews were tape-recorded to enable the researchers to concentrate on the on-going interview and enhance the conversational nature of the interview and to allow sensitive issues to be discussed when appropriate. All interviews were transcribed to allow for close analysis.

The data from the interview transcripts and the journals were collated, analysed using the framework of mentoring perspectives identified by Wang and Odell (2002) as a means of identifying major approaches and trends in terms of the aims of the study. When presenting the written or verbal data from the early career teachers and mentors they were identified by referring to their gender, role, setting and location as follows: F, M, S, Co representing a female mentor in a secondary school in a country location or M, T, P, Ci representing a male teacher in a primary school in a city location.

Analysis and discussion
The participants in this study were all early career teachers in their first year of teaching and all had a teacher mentor from their school who was either self selected or appointed for them by the school. Those who were self selected by the early career teachers were generally chosen for reasons such as proximity in the school, the ability to offer support such as behaviour management advice, teaching the same year group or subject. Gender, closeness in age or mutual interests which offered the chance for friendship and local social interaction were also given as important reasons for selecting a mentor and important factors in assisting early career teachers’ induction into the school and community. Those who were appointed by the school were chosen based on their seniority and knowledge of the school and curriculum requirements. Very few of the mentors in this study had received any formal training although all expressed an interest and saw value in undertaking such programs if they were offered.

Mentor roles and types of support
The mentors in this study had a wide range of views relating to their roles ranging from a “friend, confidant and sounding board” to a supervisor running very structured fortnightly sessions and regular formal monitoring of classroom practice. Most saw their roles primarily from a humanistic perspective (Wang & Odell, 2002) with a strong focus on the emotional support and the need for socialising the early career teacher into the profession. However, there was also a strong situated apprentice perspective (Wang & Odell, 2002) which saw a focus on acquiring contextualised event-structured knowledge about classroom instruction often achieved through demonstration and team teaching approaches. The type of mentoring which occurred for these early career teachers relied on the knowledge and expertise of the mentor, the relationship that developed between the parties involved and the contextual factors of the school setting.

In the professional area of focus most of the mentors in this study were involved in administrative orientation activities including familiarisation with the school personnel, school routines, expectations and the school community. In two of the cases this was conducted by the school deputy principal before the mentors were established. For some mentors this professional focus was difficult as they saw themselves, and in some cases were required by their principal, as supervisors and undertook close and formal monitoring of the early career teacher aligned to the situated apprentice approach. The following quote describes this dilemma and some of the problems it caused:

As the head teacher I was appointed by the principal as mentor/supervisor and will be assessing C... for his Teaching Certificate and this has caused some conflict for both of us I think. I meet with him on a regular weekly
basis, look at his programs, pop into his classes and generally keep an eye on him. As a result I think he feels more vulnerable coming to me for more what I would see as mentoring which is disappointing as I like him and see him as a capable young teacher and feel I have more to offer than just monitoring him in a formal way (M, M, P, Ci).

This style of formal mentoring did not accommodate many of the early career teacher’s immediate needs and often led to a less than open approach. In the case of the early career teacher in the school from the quotation above, he relied heavily on informal support of colleagues and peers outside the school. Where the mentors were self selected or where the early career teacher had some form of input into the selection of the mentor and type of mentor needed, there appeared to be a closer understanding. The ability to meet the needs as they arose rather than in a planned formal session at a later date seemed to lead to more positive longer term outcomes for all concerned.

When the mentors were asked to explain the type of professional mentoring activities all described ‘situated apprentice’ type activities such as providing advice or assistance with classroom management concerns, programming, resource choice, assessment ideas and strategies to help cater for a wide range of abilities as common areas of need. In addition they highlighted the need for ongoing ‘humanistic approach’ input such as reassurance, praise and feedback on the early career teacher’s efforts. Recognising strengths and building on these was mentioned by a few mentors who saw the importance of developing quality teaching and ongoing professional learning and development.

The mentors acknowledged that as the year progressed there had been a change in their roles in line with the early career teachers’ needs. All reported a growth in self confidence by the early career teachers and the desire to become more independent in decision making and assertive in managing daily demands of teaching. One mentor explained the changes in the early career teacher at her school as:

When K….. arrived at the school she was really enthusiastic and wanted to do everything by the book and was caught up with focusing on meeting outcomes and indicators. Then she started to encounter classroom management problems and became very stressed by everything. She was having a real dilemma on how do I balance this out? I encouraged her to slow down and to get the children on task and address the behaviour problems, develop trust and a good working environment and worry about the paperwork later. This has seemed to work and she is now much more relaxed and on top of things and is starting to spend more time on her programming (F, M, P, Ci).

The opportunity to engage in team teaching and to visit other schools to share ideas relating to programming, assessment and teaching strategies was strongly supported by the mentors as excellent professional learning as was undertaking professional development courses and activities at school, district and state level. Challenging the early career teachers to continue their professional growth was mentioned by mentors with suggestions as to planning to undertake additional responsibilities in the school, teaching senior classes and being involved in whole school activities were suggested. Little attention seemed to be given to challenging their pedagogy, reflection and reassessment of values and goals as advocated in the ‘critical constructivist’ approach to mentoring but rather the focus seemed to be helping them adapt to the current teaching style that prevailed in the school.

All the mentors in this study highlighted their role in assisting the early career teacher with personal issues as an important area of focus. This required them to adopt a ‘humanistic approach’ to their mentoring as they assisted with issues ranged from assisting with finding accommodation, establishing social contacts and networks in the school and community to providing friendship and moral support, advice on school personnel, school politics and dealing with parents to generally making them feel valued and respected in the workplace. This often required confidentiality and the ability to have empathy with the beginning teacher and support through counselling. The mentors highlighted one of the unique aspects of mentoring which does not happen with planned supervision
and that is the ability of a mentor to offer immediate support and the type which meets the individual early career teachers’ needs.

As the year progressed the mentors noted their need to give personal support lessened as the confidence of the early career teacher grew and they became familiar with their workplace. However, it was noted from a few the early career teacher interviews that the “beginning teacher” tag often remained and these teachers commonly found power relations operated in the school to prevent their ideas or approaches being considered which often contributed to continued self doubt and lower self efficacy. One early career teacher explained:

Although M…… is an excellent mentor and has helped me in so many ways, I think it is a long time since she was a new teacher and knows what it is like to always be the inexperienced one. I sometimes get frustrated that every time I offer an idea or suggestion in the faculty it is not taken seriously because of my lack of experience or I am told it could not happen like that here. I wonder when I will move out of this beginner stage and be accepted as someone who can contribute rather than always needing help (F, T, S, Co).

Although this situation is more likely to occur in schools with an older, well established teaching staff where there is little staff turnover, it may also be prevented by the selection of mentors who are relatively young or are not part of the executive or hold positions of power.

**Outcomes for early career teachers**

Early career teachers strongly supported the need for a mentor and explained the importance of having both someone who could give them professional and personal guidance. They credited the mentors with helping them to “survive” the early days and to establish themselves in the school and, particularly the case of country teachers, the local community. They identified improved classroom management skills, programming and assessment ideas as well as confidence and higher self esteem as major professional and personal outcomes of mentoring. One teacher explained:

T……. has been a real saviour for me. Teaching in the next room has meant she is readily available in my times of need particularly with difficult students and being able to share my planning ideas and concerns with her has helped me develop my confidence. She has also given me lots of advice on how to deal with other staff, the executive members and parents as she knows the children and their backgrounds (M, T, P, Co).

The mentors identified the early career teachers as displaying increased confidence in both the classroom and the school and community settings resulting in a willingness to become involved in more professional and social activities. The early career teachers became more relaxed with the students and developed good relationships within the staff and community that in turn assisted in establishing their credibility and professional status. As this confidence grew the early career teachers moved from a state of dependence through collaboration with their mentor to a state of independence and self-direction with consultation required on fewer occasions.

**Outcomes for Mentors**

The mentors in this study supported previous research which has highlighted the potential for mentors to personally derive substantial benefits from their work with early career teachers (David, 2000; Holloway, 2001; Huling & Resta, 2001). As the mentors in this study assisted the beginning teachers they also improved their own professional competency as they commonly shared new ideas, reassessed their own approaches and often undertook team teaching and lessons the new teachers observed. As they encouraged the new teachers to critically reflect on their lessons and problems many mentors found that they were doing the same and often in tandem with the early career teachers finding new solutions to problems and additional curriculum ideas for their lessons. The following quote from a mentor explains this:

As I listen to M…. describe the problems he was encountering in his classroom I often think about how I would cope if that was happening in my
classroom. The more advice I have to give the more I find myself thinking is my advice as realistic and useful to him as I think it is. When I came up against similar problems it makes me really look at my own actions and think, is there a better way forward and what is really best for the students (F, M, S, Co).

Most mentors expressed a sense of renewal and satisfaction from helping less experienced colleagues and enjoyed the collaboration often citing admiration for the sound syllabus knowledge, competence and skills the new teachers displayed along with their enthusiasm and capacity for hard work. Only one mentor in the study advised the early career teacher to disregard their preservice knowledge and experiences, all others welcomed and were keen to share their new ideas, strategies and approaches to teaching and learning seeing mentoring as a two way process where both parties can gain.

Through undertaking the role of mentor and having their expertise and advice recognised the self-esteem, confidence and self efficacy of the mentors reported to have increased. This had the effect of empowering the experienced teacher, developing their leadership skills and more clearly defining their own beliefs about teaching. One mentor explained:

I have enjoyed the experience as it has allowed me to give something back to teaching and working with a young enthusiastic person with new ideas and approaches has reignited my own interest in teaching. She has taken most of my suggestions on board and implemented them successfully in her classroom, however, I think I have learnt just as much from her. It is good to know I still have something to offer to my profession (F, M, P, Co).

Suggestions to assist mentoring

This study identified the benefits of mentoring programs as substantial for both early career teachers and mentor teachers. Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are made to improve effectiveness of mentors:

1. Early career teachers need both supervisors and mentors, however, ideally these should be different people as their roles can conflict and require different skills and relationships.
2. Highly competent teachers with at least five years of teaching experience, teaching the same year or subject area as the early career teacher and the same gender can offer the best support as mentors.
3. The role of mentor needs to be established by mutual agreement between the parties and should be undertaken willingly and preferably through self selection.
4. Each early career teacher needs a supervisor in addition to a mentor and that person is needed from the start of the year or employment period with their role primarily involving orientation and administrative assistance in settling into the school.
5. Mentors should be formally recognised by their school with the provision of a time allowance and training to assist them in developing the skills needed including different styles which can be used.
6. To be successful mentoring relationships need to engender feelings of safety and support for both parties together through open communication to develop trust and confidentiality.
7. The mentor needs to be prepared to provide assistance with both the professional and personal aspects of teaching.
8. Mentors need to engage in professional dialogue with the early career teachers to encourage reflection and provide constructive feedback, affirmation and encouragement in addition to challenging them in order to ensure their professional growth continues.

Conclusion

This study supports important role mentors can play in the process of beginning to teach as being highly significant since it is through the guidance and support of these colleagues that early career teachers can learn to develop an appropriate body of practical professional knowledge and receive encouragement to promote professional growth. The value of personal support given by mentors is
also recognised in helping to reduce the isolation of teaching, encourage satisfaction and commitment, prevent burnout and discouragement and retain good teachers.

Mentoring novice teachers is expensive in both time and energy, however, it can be justified as it can reduce the stress on early career teachers and their colleagues and improve the quality of teaching and student outcomes. Mentors need to be trained to understand their role and the many styles and perspectives that can be employed so that they can use their knowledge, skills and time to achieve maximum outcomes for the early career teachers, their students and colleagues. This study has also shown that mentoring is not only a valuable resource for early career teachers but is can also be useful as a professional growth and development experience for mentors themselves. The results of this study reinforced the contemporary view that mentors are ongoing learners themselves and need to continually inquire into their own practice and need to build a professional knowledge base of mentoring. The importance of the mentor role as an educational leader and agent of change has been highlighted but it will require further ongoing investment in mentor development (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). Successful mentoring serves to support early career teachers which will in turn strengthen the profession, promote quality teaching and school improvement and encourage new teachers to feel a valued ‘insider’ who will be motivated to remain in teaching.

References


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