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## **Fishing for Evidence of Impact**

*In this article Gill Rowland, Hazel King, Penny Webb, Alison Cogger and Karen Vincent use seafaring imagery to portray a research project focussed on enriching mentoring within a school university initial teaching training partnership. They report on the professional development benefits gained from use of their framework for both school based mentors and university-based tutors.*

The partnership between school-based mentors and university-based tutors plays an important part in the education of the next generation of teachers. This article shares the findings of a university's research project seeking to understand both the barriers and enablers to school-based mentors' professional development. Incidentally, this research project is also supporting the university-based teacher educators' professional development. During the process, the group adopted seafaring metaphors to describe their work. These have been used throughout this article to assist with navigation. The findings of this research will be used in the further development of support for mentoring and tutoring within the initial teacher education partnership.

### **Background: A sea of discontent**

'The Importance of Teaching' (2010), reiterated the important role that school based settings have in the development of new entrants to the profession. As a university-based provider of initial teacher education, we work with around 600 partner schools and settings and were conscious of a wide range of practice and competence among our mentors. We were already in the process of discussing ways of further supporting them when an Ofsted inspection in 2014 tasked us to: *"improve the quality of school-based mentoring so that it is all of a consistently high standard"*. This required affirmative action resulting in the employment of a consultant. The consultant was commissioned to examine school and university practice across all areas of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) mentoring and quality assurance and the recommendations were as follows:

- The nature and frequency of mentor training and development needs to be reviewed and refreshed, with a particular emphasis on coaching approaches across all phases
- Consider re-establishing mentoring programmes with the option of accreditation
- Consider developing a mentor recognition framework
- As far as possible, mentor training or development activities should be distributed to the areas or managed on line
- Complete the pilot for and evaluate the use of a school self-evaluation document as a self-improvement tool, and consider its future use for designation at the beginning of a partnership, giving tiered partnership status to a school
- Review the purpose and operation of area-based meetings in each phase, so that they are better attended and provide a more meaningful experience for mentors, taking into consideration the desire expressed by a number of mentors to be members of a community of practice.

## **Introducing a framework for mentoring: Constructing the fishing vessel**

It was recognised that we had never really provided a benchmark of our expectations for our partner schools. We had a 'Partnership Agreement', a contract that was signed by both partners that spoke in broad terms about provision, but nothing about what it should look like in practice. Over a period of months, we developed the 'Partnership Evaluation Framework' (PEF) which focused on four areas of the student experience in school:

- Induction
- Professional Development
- The Quality of Coaching and Mentoring
- Working in Partnership

We developed descriptors for practice in each of these headings at three levels: Partnership School, Established Partnership School and Leading Partnership School. University-based tutors visiting schools use it as a basis for discussion with lead school mentors with a view to agreeing actions to develop practice.

## **The role of university-based tutors: Supporting the crew**

University-based tutors also experienced a significant shift in that their role - from a model of predominantly supporting student teachers, to one where they offered professional development to school-based mentors within their settings. University-based tutors now work with lead mentors and curriculum/class mentors to help them develop in line with the actions arising from joint discussions using the Partnership Evaluation Framework. This also supports the development of quality assurance procedures where there are several mentors within one school. As the focus is now on supporting the professional development of mentoring, the aim is to enable school-based mentors to work even more effectively alongside the student teachers to maximise their learning and progression. In order to support this renewed focus on the professional development for mentors, a 'Mentor Development Programme' was developed. This has a strong focus on the leadership and management skills required to develop professional learning in other adults more broadly. The programme is based on a suite of five modules that mentors are encouraged to engage with, either on a stand-alone basis or as a package. This takes a wider view of mentoring encompassing:

- The Conscious Mentor
- The Mentor as Leader
- The Mentor as Role Model
- The Mentor as Assessor
- The Mentor as Facilitator

We have seen an encouraging level of take-up for the sessions which each last three hours, are run in five venues in partnership schools and are offered free of charge. We are

currently in the process of developing the programme as a blended learning opportunity for participants to access in their own time, since some schools have difficulty in releasing mentors during the daytime.

### **A project to research changes in mentoring practices: Fishing for information**

Having implemented a number of changes to practice in a short space of time, the university's School of Teacher Education and Development commissioned a research project focused on the impact of these changes on the quality of mentoring in our partnership schools. We formed a steering group of university tutors, all with a keen interest in developing mentoring and met to discuss how to tackle the task. We have a diverse range of research experience, spanning those very experienced in doing research to comparatively inexperienced. It soon became apparent that this project was vast in scope and would include collecting perspectives from school mentors, students and university tutors, as well as drawing on the immense array of data already accumulating from day-to-day partnership activities.

From the inception of the research project, seafaring metaphors entered our conversations and have assisted us in making sense of our findings. This appears to have been initially prompted by one of the research group members who, prior to our first meeting, had recently returned from a trip on her Dunkirk Little Ship; Firefly. Bolton (2014) argues that developing metaphors is an innate human strategy for making sense of 'anything and everything which is difficult to grasp or communicate, especially abstractions' (Bolton, 2014, p 103). McGilchrist (2009) also explores the idea that creating metaphors is integral to the process of abstraction. Certainly it helped us to consider how our actions were impacting on each aspect of the research process. For example, we called our research project 'Firefly' and saw ourselves as a little boat going out to sea to find out what was out there. We likened the mass of responses from the tutor and mentor meetings as collecting the breadth of experiences in a sprawling fishing net, whilst the semi-structured conversations with individual mentors were seen as being more like 'diving'; these were the deep, personalised stories of some of the mentors.

The next section will explain how we undertook the research through the metaphor of a plaited rope, the separate strands of which were integral to the project's strength; each a separate strand of our work, yet integral to each other if the project was to have strength.

### **Three strands of rope: Weaving the research project together**

The steering group for the research project began by isolating possible research questions and two strands of inquiry quickly emerged:

- Researching changes in mentoring: The impact of the changing roles of school-based mentors and university-based tutors as the university moved towards a mentor-facing rather than student-facing model
- Effective mentoring: what enabled, as well as what hampered, the effective mentoring of student teachers on school placements.

Halfway through the first year of the project, a third strand of research came into focus. Having recently joined the university as teacher educators following careers as school teachers, some of us found that the project gave a context within which to investigate our roles, both as teacher educators and as researchers. This became a third line of inquiry, as we began to collect data on our own experiences as we became immersed into the world of teacher education research. Each of these strands will be explored throughout the remainder of this article.



### **Strand 1: Researching changes in mentoring**

One of the first activities we undertook in order to reach some 'common ground' was to discuss our personal journeys, from mentoring students in schools to acting as university tutors supporting mentors. This sharing of stories led to the desire to design a research methodology aimed at collecting rich stories from the school-based mentors with whom the university worked in partnership. This would require some 'diving for information'. We designed an interview procedure to gather these individual experiences of mentoring.

The resulting interview design began with an elicitation exercise; a sorting activity designed to prompt conversations. Individual mentors were asked to place nine statements, as follows, on a continuum according to how important they were to their role as a mentor and to share the reasons for their choices:

- Holding weekly mentor meetings
- Taking a diagnostic and rigorous approach to documentation
- Monitoring records and files
- Engaging in moderation and assessment
- Ensuring a coherent and evidence based focus on progression
- Knowing students well enough to offer support when required
- Ensuring an effective dialogue is maintained between stakeholders so that timely action can be taken if required
- Encouraging independent self-reflection and ambitious target setting
- Undertaking observations that are focused on pupil learning and are used diagnostically to assess progress

The mentors who took part in the interviews were encouraged to voice their thoughts to the researcher as they battled with the task of trying to prioritise the statements, often ending up with clusters of statements rather than a single continuum.

This icebreaker activity was then followed up by a series of questions to the mentor:

- How are you supported as a mentor and by whom?

- Can you describe the process of observing and feeding back from an observation of a student teacher?
- What has been the impact of the changed role of the university tutor on this process?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt that you were effective as a mentor?
- What was it that made you effective and how did you know that you were effective?
- Can you tell me about a time that challenged you as a mentor?
- What do you understand by the term 'effective mentor'?

## **Strand 2: Effective mentoring**

These initial interviews with school mentors provided rich data and stories about mentoring whilst the researchers learnt about interviewing techniques and gathering data from conversations. However, after a discussion with the senior leader at the university who had commissioned the project as an impact study, we realised that the project had not necessarily gained enough detail on what supported or impeded mentors' professional development. We needed to refocus the research even more sharply on the barriers and enablers to effective mentoring so that 'impact' could be evaluated. We needed to learn how to do some deep-sea diving!

We now re-envisioned the role of the mentor using the metaphor of a deep sea of knowledge, skills and understanding. This sea would be fed by a number of rivers (many of these stemming from the support structures within the university), but some of these rivers could be restricted or dammed up by factors that inhibit high-quality mentoring (such a time constraints). We drew up new questions to discuss with mentors in order to capture the barriers and enablers of high-quality mentoring, and thus began a second round of deep-sea diving, organising new research conversations in order to gather impact case studies. The main focus for these conversations was: *What factors have had the most impact on the development of your mentoring role in recent years?*

The steering group also explored other avenues to collect data alongside 'deep-sea diving' interviews with mentors. Perspectives on the enablers and barriers to high quality mentoring were also captured from mentors attending a variety of university professional development opportunities, and the opinions of a selection of university tutors were gathered by geographical area leads. These were seen as 'casting the fishing net wider'. Throughout the process of data gathering, the mentoring in the partnership schools and the relationships between the school-based mentors and university-based tutors continued to develop. This led to the capture of data that represented snapshots of an ever-changing seascape.

### **Sorting out the Fishing nets**

When we met to analyse the data from the meetings of university-based tutors and school-based mentors in addition to mentor interviews, the group was confronted with what appeared to be an insurmountable mass of data. Responses from the meetings produced a range of enablers and barriers to mentor development but categorising these seemed

incredibly daunting. Furthermore, the semi-structured conversations, which had at this point been transcribed, explored in depth specific experiences from the mentors.

Faced with the task of sorting the data in order to abstract themes, it required the modelling of an experienced researcher within the group to demonstrate the process of tallying recurrent phrases to make sense of the stories the data was telling. Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out that the raw data itself indicates emergent theme. Collaboratively coding the hundreds of responses from meetings resulted in a systematic approach and after many hours, the factors that had impacted most on the mentoring partnership began to emerge. When this was added to the data emerging from the individual interviews we began to have a greater understanding of the barriers and enablers of mentors' professional development. Figure 1 shows the rivers feeding the mentors' deep sea of knowledge and the barriers that may block these.



Figure 1: Illustration of barriers and enablers to high-quality mentoring from mentoring conversations



## **Four Main Rivers feeding the sea of knowledge**

Four key themes emerged in response to the research question: *What factors have had the most impact on the development of your mentoring role in recent years?*

### *River of Relationships*

One of the emerging themes focused on 'relationships', specifically the development and reflection on these to develop pedagogically excellent mentoring practice. For example, a secondary mentor commented that *'I can approach the link tutor and feel confident in asking a question'* and *'...the link tutor is around more, this makes me feel at ease'*.

### *River of Intrinsic Principles and Confidence*

Integral to the mentors' stories was a relationship with their 'growing confidence'. We understood this to be the development of an intrinsic framework of individual principles that aligned with the mentors' sense of purpose and influenced their confidence to mentor. For example, a secondary mentor commented that *'I feel more confident at giving constructive feedback at different stages'*. The sense of confidence and purpose was also expressed powerfully by a primary lead mentor who described how overwhelming the responsibility for the development of others can be.

### *River of Support and Resourcing*

Mentors conveyed the importance of mutual understanding of what is and is not possible. A specific example was the secondary mentor who stated clearly that they *'do have the qualifications and experience. I feel supported (by my link tutor)'*. Mentors also valued the opportunity to attend the Mentor Development Programme. One mentor stated that *'The Mentor Development Programme is very informative, well delivered with good resources and networking opportunities'*.

### *River of Processes and Frameworks*

Finally, a theme emerged relating to frameworks, acknowledging that the resources and support that had been given enabled them to 'make sense of frameworks and processes for mentoring and understand what is required'. A secondary mentor discussed the frameworks in relation to their own school development, noticing that now *'it isn't just about joint observations but the development of the school, the staff meeting and the PEF (partnership evaluation framework)'*.

## **Strand 3: Developing as Researchers (developing our diving and fishing skills)**

Throughout the first year of the research project, numerous opportunities arose to disseminate some of the snapshots captured of the findings. We were given a presentation slot in the termly conference for university tutors, and ran a series of workshops in the annual partnership conference attended by both university tutors and school colleagues. We also submitted a paper for consideration at an external conference, which was accepted. These events began to take us out of our comfort zone and propel us towards the role of researchers as we presented our findings. Not only did we now play a part in the

fishing for data on effective mentoring, we began to gather data on our personal journeys within this new identity as a 'researcher'.

As we continued to fish, dive and collect data and evaluate the findings emerging from the sea of mentor conversations, we realised that the mix of more novice and more experienced researchers within the group appeared to support a dialogic approach towards our professional development. These dialogues had been part of the steering group from the beginning as many of the members of the group were drawn towards the research project in order to be able to undertake some research with more experienced colleagues. However as we regularly and systematically reflected on our own development through recording conversations, transcribing and thematically analysing them, four themes emerged in relation to our own development as researchers as represented in figure 2.

It became evident that the themes emerging from analysis of the mentor conversations were recurring in the conversations between researchers. The relationships built within the group from the first day aided the development of the intrinsic principles and confidence of the researchers. The support within the group and development of resources such as the sorting tool for the interviews, enabled growth as researchers. The conversations based on metaphor aided our understanding, and the frameworks and structures, such as timetabling presentations at university conferences and having a paper accepted at an external conference, provided the building blocks of development as researchers. Hence the third thread of the research materialised; the researching of mentor development grew into an exploration of researcher development itself.



Figure 2: Themes emerging from analysis of researcher conversations.

## **Conclusions: Continuing to Fish for Evidence of Impact**

As our work with schools has had to continue to change and develop in order to fit national policy agendas, we have so far been able to survive the rocky seas that threaten university-based initial teacher education. With the significant shift towards more school-based models of training and development for those embarking on initial teacher education programmes, it is important that mentors and university tutors receive support to enable their continuous professional development. The research project has enabled this to happen. Whilst the Partnership Agreements had set out the roles and responsibilities of mentors and university tutors previously, the establishment of a Partnership Evaluation Framework made this a more robust and meaningful process and it was felt there would be dividends in investigating this impact.

In aiming to improve both the quality and consistency of school based mentoring, the School of Teacher Education and Development's changes aimed to meet both the needs of mentors in schools and those of the university-based tutors. The Mentor Development Programme, which embeds the National Standards for School-Based ITT Mentors (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) has enabled mentors to self-evaluate against these standards. Thus, through recognition of the importance of their role through the establishment of this research project, further engagement with CPD opportunities has been encouraged..

The research project has assisted the partnership in identifying four strands that have emerged which identify how both university tutors and school-based mentors have begun to adapt to these changes:

- Relationships
- Support and Resourcing
- Intrinsic Principles and Confidence
- Processes and Frameworks

Through impact case studies and exploring different methods of data collection, including analysis through the use of metaphors, this work enabled us to identify some of the potential barriers and enablers to high-quality mentoring and to develop our skills as researchers alongside.

This article has outlined how mentoring plays a significant role in supporting student teachers in schools and how our partnership's programme of improvements has set to evolve and change practice. The emphasis on mentors' professional learning has been an important part of our quest to improve the quality and consistency in mentoring practice. It is important to notice that mentors have valued this support for their learning and have enjoyed the engagement in their 'communities of practice'.

Our research has shown that mentoring must be recognised as integral to school improvement. Where this happens, it affects mentors' status and confidence and therefore their ability to support the next generation of the teaching profession.

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