Researching mentoring, developing researchers: a parallel approach to research and development in teacher education

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Abstract

This paper takes an interpretive approach in examining how institutional support has facilitated newer teacher educators' professional learning as researchers whilst undertaking a research project about mentoring in teacher education. The research project took place within a faculty of education in England and asked; what supports mentors' professional development? Acknowledging that mentoring is a social practice and can be seen as 'doings, sayings and relatings' (Kemmis et al, 2014), the team adopted a thematic approach to the analysis of data (Strauss and Corbin, 2009) and discovered that what supports the professional learning of mentors also supported their own professional learning: These include knowledge of one's own educational aims and principles, support and resourcing, taking advantage of diverse opportunities, opportunities to practice and understand how to undertake research and developing strong relationships and reflecting on these in order to develop pedagogically excellent practice. This paper demonstrates that including novice teacher educator researchers in faculty projects builds capacity and expertise and can help to improve and maintain quality within the challenging context of English teacher education.

Keywords: teacher education, mentoring, developing researchers, professional learning

1. Introduction

This paper explores our experiences as a group of teacher educators from England who voluntarily participated as novice researchers in a research project about mentoring within a large faculty of education. It is the aim of this paper to share these experiences in order to attend to the 'universal lack of attention to the professional learning needs of teacher educators' (Czerniawski et al, 2017).

One of the authors of this paper was invited to lead a faculty funded research project in July 2016 that arose out of her existing role as an Assistant Faculty Director. The research was initiated in order to learn about the impact of changes on mentoring approaches within the faculty following a substantial change in working practices. These changes affected the working practices of mentors supporting initial teacher education programmes within our large partnership. Mentors are school-based teachers who support student teachers on university-based programmes whilst they are undertaking placements within a school setting, in order to assess their practical experience. The role of the link tutor had also changed from directly supporting and co-assessing students on placement to supporting the mentor who both mentors and assesses student teachers that are on placement in the setting.

The decision to change working practices within the partnership followed a periodic review which had highlighted some inconsistencies in the working practices of our mentors and link tutors. This finding along with a subsequent Ofsted inspection in 2014, which concluded that we needed to 'improve the quality of school based mentoring and increase the impact of link tutors to develop their quality assurance role in order to help trainees fulfil their full potential' (Ofsted, 2014), led to this change. Ofsted is a high stakes inspection that has an impact on our ability to attract students. This recommendation, when understood within the English policy context of continued marketization of UK universities (Menter et al, 2017), meant that we were potentially in a vulnerable position if we did not change our working practices.

A new conceptualisation of partnership was developed between school and university partners resulting in an approach that adapted the roles of university based tutors from working directly with students and mentors to that of professional developer of mentoring within the school. This move was an attempt to ensure that high quality mentoring continued to support the practice of new teachers at the initial stages of their training. When schools are held more accountable and are given more responsibility for the training and assessment of student teachers, it becomes vital that this is well supported (Smith, K, 2017). A self-evaluation toolkit called a Partnership Evaluation Framework was developed to support this work in four key areas: Induction, Professional Development, Mentoring and coaching and Working in Partnership. Alongside this, a five session Mentor Development Programme was conceived, designed and taught in different areas in the partnership. This programme is designed to support mentoring as a leadership skill and impact on the

school community as a whole. It was this new approach to working that our research project was designed to evaluate.

Both the project lead and five members of the research team who had volunteered to be part of this research project, were originally recruited to their university roles because of their prior experience as teachers. This aligns with the findings of Ellis et al, (2012); Griffiths, Thompson and Hryniewicz, (2014); and Murray and Male, (2005). Most of the team had been experienced mentors and teachers in school, some very recently and it was because the theme of the research project was on mentoring that they were attracted to the project. Tack et al (2018) claim that linking teacher educators' practices with structures within which to do research, supports their professional learning. They had recognised that this was a valuable opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of doing research. Although some of the team had Masters level qualifications, they were not solely recruited to their university roles on the strength of their research profiles or on their experience in doing research. However, as they found themselves researching about the impact of these changes in working practices within the faculty, they began to appreciate the significance and value of becoming more experienced at being more research focused as teacher educator researchers (Tack and Vanderlinde, 2014).

The project lead had previous experience in being part of a steering group aiming to promote a department based self-study project (Wilson, Jordan-Daus and Vincent, 2014), this inevitably had an influence on the direction of the project in fostering an inquiry based approach to the project. The team found that as they developed their knowledge and understanding of the perceptions of what supports mentors' professional development, they became more aware of their developing 'researcherly dispositions' (Tack and Vanderlinde, 2014). The following diagram shows how the team combined researching changes in mentoring approaches in order to evaluate the impact of these along with a consideration of what they perceived effective mentoring to be. These conversations were dependent on the different and complex aspects of our daily lives as teacher educators. They formed an integral part of the project as we began to make sense of our own experiences of mentoring and as we continued to develop our own relationships with our mentors as link tutors. As these conversations emerged and it became clear that we were developing our own thinking about these changes as 'insiders' of the research project, we began to evaluate our own development as researchers:

Different aspects of the teacher educator researchers' roles:

Researching changes in mentoring

Effective mentoring

Developing as researchers
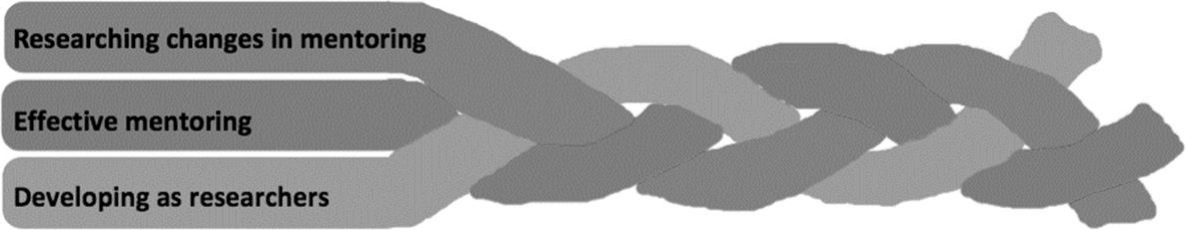
We hope that sharing our experiences of participating in this evaluation project, that we will help to add to the body of knowledge about English university based teacher educators' professional development.

As this paper is concerned with the parallel approach taken by the teacher educator researchers, in that they were simultaneously researching mentor development alongside reflecting on their own research development, this paper will be structured accordingly. Researchers' reflections will be delineated through the use of italics to highlight the development of their thinking throughout.

2.1 Policy Context of Teacher Education in England

The policy context of teacher education in England is biased in favour of school-based initial teacher education as opposed to university-based initial teacher education (DfE 2010, DfE 2011). English university-based teacher educators have therefore had to ensure a sharper focus on the development of mentoring in partnership schools in order to quality assure the experiences of student teachers as they are still responsible for professional as well as academic accreditation. Whilst many teacher education lecturers in England are very experienced teachers often recruited straight from school, they are usually less experienced as researchers as advanced doctoral study is not an essential requirement for appointment (Ellis et al, 2012; Griffiths, Thompson and Hryniewicz, 2014; Murray and Male, 2005). This means that English 'once a teacher' university-based teacher educators require particular types of support in order to fulfil this aspect of their roles (Griffiths, Thompson and Hryniewich, 2014).

Universities compete for students along with schools, who are encouraged to train teachers in partnership with universities. Of school-based initial teacher training opportunities, some are salaried and some non-salaried. Wherever prospective new teachers choose to train, whether school or university based, universities are held accountable for the awarding of both academic qualifications and the granting of qualified teacher status. This means that schools must work in partnership with universities who are held accountable for the quality of training within both university and school based partnerships. Ensuring that the quality of mentoring is high is therefore essential.

Within this competitive and politically complex context, university departments of education in England are facing further challenges. Each university is awarded gold, silver or bronze teaching excellence awards according to the feedback that students give through questionnaires and surveys. These initiatives are intended to allow more consumer choice and thus drive up quality. This means that university based English teacher educators are working within complex systems subject to many pressures. Ofsted also makes regular, high stakes inspections awarding 'outstanding, good or requires improvement' judgements. These initiatives inevitably affect

prospective student teachers' decisions about university choices and inevitably the ability of university departments of education to plan ahead and to invest in teacher education and development. These factors impact on university departments of education, often leading to teacher educators prioritising teaching over research.

2.2. Newer Teacher Educators learning about doing research in England

Developing the ability to do research is an important aspect of being a teacher educator (Murray and Male, 2005, Lunenberg et al. 2017, Tack and Vanderlinde, 2014). It is a vital aspect of their continuing professional learning. In England, within an 'increasingly fragmented system' (Lunenberg et al, 2017 p559) this is incredibly challenging because demands are increasing, particularly in relation to quality assurance processes. Support for doing research is 'under-researched' (Murray, 2005 p68) meaning that if English university based teacher educators have the 'tendency', 'ability' and 'sensitivity' (Tack and Vanderlinde, 2014) to engage in research, they may need to consider how to embed a research-informed approach within their existing roles. This involves 'rediscovering the relationship between theory, practice and research in a way that is more connected to, and reflective of, one's professional life' (Kuzmik, 2002 p227). Learning more about the experiences of mentors as a social practice (Kemmis et al, 2014) within the partnership was a way for the teacher educator researchers in this project to combine this aspect of their professional roles as link tutors and developers of mentoring alongside the development of their role as a teacher educator researcher.

2.3 Understanding mentoring and researching through a social theory of practice lens

Mentoring can be seen as a social practice (Butler and Cuenca, 2012, Kemmis et al, 2014) where 'characteristic actions and activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (sayings), and in which the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic relationships (relatings)' (Kemmis et al, 2014 p155). The teacher educator researchers recognised that becoming involved in this project might be a way of making sense of what has been described as a 'rocky road' (Wood and Borg, 2010) in their formative years of teacher education. This induction phase is recognised as being incredibly challenging (Murray and Male, 2005; Van der Klink et al, 2017). They were grappling with dual identities as newer teacher educators and as formerly experienced teacher-mentors in school and were trying to make sense of a changed way of working within the partnership that was previously familiar to them as well as a change of job as illustrated by Gayle in the following reflection;

'I was really feeling my way as a visiting tutor between the tensions of what it is like in school and what the university is asking of schools. It has enabled me to give the whole thing some

grounding and (understand) the range of practices out there and how I need to do my job differently from perhaps how I was doing it because I need to understand the pressures and tensions for mentors which are not the same in any two given schools.' (Gayle, Reflection, April 2017)

Having support from the Head of School meant that the project retained a sense of momentum. It was regularly referred to in faculty conferences and meetings, helping to endorse the value of the project. The idea of adopting a framework based on Kemmis et al's (2014) practice architectures initially came from the Head of School who suggested that we consider it as a theoretical framework in the evaluation project because we were aiming to understand the barriers and enablers for mentors in their professional learning. If we understand that cooperation between parties is essential within the new conceptualisation of partnership, then we can begin to know more about how what mentors are 'doing, saying and relating' (Kemmis et al, 2014) within the different types of relationships that exist within the partnership. We might then be able to better understand what the experiences of our mentors and newer teacher educator researchers might be in order to support their development.

'All of it is raising the status of mentoring and giving that credit where it is needed and I think that sometimes mentors need support with empowering themselves and I think that this has empowered me to know that I can go and give them that support that they need but actually to be able to say that there is support out there and to utilise it and to think about what their priorities are as well'. (Sally, reflection, April 2017)

Knowing that the project was important to senior leaders within the faculty was crucial to the success of the project. Endorsement from them came from sustained, regular and continued interest during planned and chance meetings.

3.1 Planning the research: Structure and approach

The project lead was asked to lead the project by the Head of School, based on previous experience as an Assistant Faculty Director and involvement in a development group set up to monitor and support the changed ways of working within the faculty. The project lead (Katy) had not previously led a research project but is currently undertaking a Doctorate in Education. The Head of School also asked an experienced researcher (Jill) within the faculty to be part of the project as a facilitator and another experienced researcher (Wendy) in the faculty agreed to be a critical friend to the project. The School of Teacher Education and Development asked for volunteers to participate in this evaluation project. No specific qualifications were necessary, just an interest in mentoring. Five of us met initially to conceptualise how the project might operate. I had discussed some guiding principles with the Head of School and explained to the newly formed team that;

'This will be a participatory project. It is an opportunity for collaborative enquiry and will invite participation from link tutors and mentors at various stages. Ideally participants might be co-researchers rather than just respondents but people will be involved as appropriate and feasible' (Katy, meeting notes July 2016)

Whilst the team understood that the aim of the project was to 'improve organisational partnerships and professional relationships to support initial teacher education, so as to enhance the learning, development and wellbeing of children and young people' (Katy, meeting notes, July 2016), the notes of the meeting show that as an open ended project, we struggled to define a clear sense of direction. Apart from Jill, the team had no previous experience in doing a large research project as illustrated in the following quotation:

When I responded to (Katy's) email to get involved with researching how we support mentors I didn't know how far I would be taken out of my comfort zone. As a primary school teacher, I was at the top of my game. Coming here, I was at the bottom of the game. I didn't even know what this research game was. (Hannah, July 2017)

One of the members expressed that she joined the group because she wanted to be able to research with some experts, which was interesting because the perceived 'experts' didn't see themselves as such! The research lead had never led a research group before and very much felt her way through and Jill admits that she didn't really know what her role was at the beginning and saw herself as scribe and guide:

'I think at the start I was following (Head of School's) request to provide help and guidance to shape the project. I adopted the role that I know works, which is to ask questions, problematise, introduce ideas about process based on my experience and to help with documentation. I tried to offer reassurance and be a sounding board and critical friend. It was important to let colleagues have the necessary discussion they wanted to have and speak the language that was meaningful and I wanted to support the project leader in enabling this'. (Jill, reflection, September 2017)

The team were very clear that they wanted to gather 'rich stories of mentoring' (Meeting notes, July 2016). Yet also asked how they might 'do rigorous research when it involves data like stories?' thus illustrating the team's insecurity in undertaking research. Yet, Jill ambitiously encouraged the team to agree on a timeline for the project, including some key aims such as presenting at the faculty July scholarship day in the summer of 2017:

'By the July Scholarship Day there will be an interesting story to report, including what has been learnt about tutoring and mentoring and what has been learnt about how a collaborative enquiry model can support professional and partnership development in the new Initial Teacher Education model' (Meeting notes, July 2016)

Wendy, as critical friend to the project, suggested early on that The Head of school should act as a sponsor of the project. This meant that Katy would need to regularly brief him in order to ensure that the project remained on track with the original aims. As part of this role, the Head of School shared an article by Kemmis et al (2014) as a potential theoretical lens. Kemmis et al (2014) conceptualise mentoring as a specific kind of social practice in terms of a theory of practice architectures i.e. specific cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements found or brought into a site that enable and constrain a practice: arrangements that make the practice possible. 'Understood as a social practice, mentoring is a specific kind of cooperative human activity in which characteristic actions and activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (sayings), and in which the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic relationships (relatings)' (Kemmis et al, 2014).

Mentoring is therefore:

1. Understood and conceptualised in different ways (sayings)
2. Enacted in different ways (doings)
3. People relating to one another differently (relatings) (Kemmis et al, 2014)

The research sought to understand:

1. The different things people in the partnership were saying about mentoring (sayings)
2. The different things people in the partnership were doing when mentoring (doings)
3. The different ways people were relating to each other in the partnership when mentoring (relatings)

Considering Kemmis et als' (2014) theoretical framework helped us to shape possible ways of designing the project and gave us a direction.

3.2 Ethical considerations

In line with University policy and best practice, we conducted our evaluation with clear adherence to ethical practice and principles. We operated on a basis of informed consent from all participants. This included the right to withdraw from research activities at any stage of the process, the right to review data (as objects willingly 'given' to the evaluation) and to withdraw or request amendment of these, the opportunity to participate as appropriate in data gathering activity. We ensured that all data was held securely and was anonymised so that no participant or partnership setting is identified during this research project. In the event, no participant chose to withdraw from participation. There was a strong emphasis placed on ownership of the data, including interviewees and the mentors were given the opportunity to review the data before final analysis and publication and given the right to reject any

comments they would not wish to have included. However, gaining ethical clearance was another learning journey for the team as illustrated in the following conversations:

'So I knew about ethics, because I work with student teachers who have to do ethical sheets for their assignments. I get it, I know it's important but the turnaround time seems incredibly long and you submitted and it seemed a while before anything came back and I'm thinking …we're wasting time, we're wasting time…so I think it's been an eye opener to me and I know it's important we do those processes. I do absolutely support that, but that was interesting'. (Gayle, conversation April, 2017)

'When you are in a school setting and doing a little action research project to here, it's just huge isn't it? (Hannah, conversation April, 2017)

'It's just massive' (Katy, conversation, April 2017)

Taking time to ensure that due process was followed and consideration given to all aspects of the requirements such as risk assessments and peer review took time, particularly as this was based on acquiring new knowledge. This was frustrating for some of the team who found it difficult that research processes are incredibly complex and take time to complete.

3.3 Deciding on the Methods to use

'The first day we met, I just went home buzzing with the excitement of it all. There was, I don't know if we all felt experts, but there definitely was at least one expert with us that day and I learnt so much just from that and was so encouraged'. (Hannah, reflection, April 2017)

While we knew that we wanted to gather mentors' stories and learn about their experiences of mentoring, we iteratively constructed an approach to gathering these using mixed methods in order to capture perspectives on mentoring that could be used to evaluate impact. However, this process was a source of tension for the project lead, Katy who was at that time grappling with a doctorate assignment that questioned the nature of knowledge and methodological approaches as illustrated in the following excerpt:

'I think one of the things that I'm holding on to is the fact that we said right back in July we wanted rich stories of mentoring and this is one of the things that I'm kind of really grappling with. We want rich stories of mentoring and yet we are generalising those rich stories through the emerging of themes. We are looking for themes aren't we, which actually moves away from rich stories? It's a personal thing I'm really grappling with. I don't know if any of you have felt that at all or whether that's…I don't know'. (Katy, conversation, April, 2017)

Gaining access to mentors' perspectives required the research team to go out into the field, as this was not information gathered routinely. They did this through both individual mentor conversations. Other sources of data were obtained through activities that were naturally occurring within the university and partnership such as

meetings and conversations. The research team also audio recorded conversations and meetings.

Nine Mentors in total consented to being part of the individual research conversations. The mentors were recruited through pre-existing relationships with university tutors, some offered to be part of the research through attendance at the Mentor Development Programme and some were specifically requested to be part of the research so that as wide a representation of mentors as possible was achieved. We aimed to represent the many different 'types' of mentors that work in partnership with us. Mentors participated in an elicitation exercise, where they had nine statements about mentoring to place in a diamond 9 ranking from most important to me to least important to me, a sorting activity and some semi-structured questions about mentoring in order to prompt conversations about their mentoring experiences. The 9 statements mentors were asked to place on a continuum from most important to me and least important to me were:

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

Getting to the stage of conducting the interviews was demanding. One of the most valuable exercises for the team was piloting the research activities and questions. It gave them the opportunity to see an interview in progress with a volunteer mentor who attended one of the research meetings and learn that the questions and activities that they had designed induced a strong response. We had asked the mentor about a time that had challenged them as a mentor and they told us a story about how one of their students had turned things around, tearfully as Pippa recalls:

'When we introduced ourselves as novice researchers this was the first opportunity for me and some of the group to collect data so we started with a role play interview and we invited a mentor in for a trial run. A learning experience was that we produced an emotional response in the mentor demonstrating how powerful interviews can be for participants'. *(Pippa, Reflection, September 2017)*

This helped to reassure us that we had connected with what was important to mentors. We believed that our questions were appropriate and would prompt conversations about mentoring:

- *How are you supported as a mentor and by whom?*
- *Can you describe the process of observing and feeding back of an observation of a student teacher?*
- *What has been the impact of the changed role of the link 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 would you have hoped had happened?)*
- *Where did you place this school in terms of the PEF and what do you understand by the terms 'effective mentor'?*

We felt sure that these carefully considered questions would tell us about individuals' experiences of mentoring and proceeded with piloting our interviews. We then arranged for the Head of School to attend our meeting to share the results of our pilot interviews in February 2017. As it turns out, this marked a turning point for the research project in that these were not favourably received meaning that we had to substantially revise our research questions and approach. This was a painful process, particularly for the research lead who recalls:

'The Head of School turned up to our meeting to hear the results of our pilot project and for us to share our work so far. I had shared the questions during one of my regular briefings and we had worked on the wording so it was a surprise to me to learn that we were on completely the wrong tack. We were not asking the right questions about what enables and creates barriers to mentor development. This was the essence of the evaluation project. Had the changes that had been implemented had any effect or not? As the leader of the project, I felt like I'd led the team off a cliff. We were encouraged to take a more creative approach and began designing all sorts of ambitious methods to gather data on these but I have to admit, it felt like it was a struggle to get through the rest of the meeting'. (Katy, reflection, February, 2017)

However, despite this setback, we revised the questions and changed our approach in order to ensure that we were more sharply focused on collecting data about what enabled or created barriers to mentoring. We retained the sorting activity elicitation exercise and amended the semi-structured questions. We also created a mind map to allow mentors to focus on their own development so that we could consider how we might best support this. The main phase of the research aimed to involve a wider representation of mentors in answering the following questions which we hoped were more focused on learning about what supported or created barriers for mentors:

- *If you were writing a job description for your role to hand over to a new mentor, what would be on it?*

- *Using these statements provided (mentoring statements on diamonds), please place the statements in a line from most important to me to least important to me and talk through the reasons for your choices.*
- *Is there anything that is not there in the statements about mentoring that you think should be?*
- *What factors have had the most impact on the development of your mentoring role in recent years*
- *Have any of the following processes, events or relationships contributed to your mentor development (if not already mentioned)? Can you explain how?*

Processes: Partnership evaluation framework, Student feedback from placement surveys, Partnership agreement
Events: Initial mentor training, Mentor development programme, attending partnership area meetings, attending specific mentor meetings, attending conferences,
Relationships with others: Link tutor, other mentors and teachers, other mentoring and coaching programmes

Now that they had acquired the data, the team needed to find a way of making sense of it however, this was not a straightforward task. At one of our day long meetings, we sat surrounded by piles of data, discussing how best to go about finding out what it was telling us. As Jill recalls, this felt quite paralysing at the time:

'The team now had a wealth of data but the interesting thing is the way in which they were somewhat overwhelmed by it and had to find a systematic and meaningful way of analysing it-and the realisation that this wasn't mysterious but that they were well equipped to do once they had decided how' (Jill, reflection, September, 2017)

Organising the data in themes helped the team to overcome 'data paralysis'. This task was initially spurred on by Jill who modelled it to the group and the group took up the challenge of making meaning from these findings. This meeting turned out to be one of our most memorable and rewarding experiences. As we created mind maps and diagrams together, it was clear that the whole team was involved and highly motivated with this task. They felt competent to undertake it.

4.1 Findings and discussion

Data was categorised and sorted according to emerging themes (Strauss and Corbin, 2009). The emerging themes were subsequently used as a basis for further analysis according to Kemmis' theoretical framework by constructing a table according to Kemmis' architectures and placing the data within this (Kemmis et al, 2014). Subsequently, we also used this approach to analyse our own development as researchers.

It was through this process of data analysis in order to understand what had the biggest impact on the development of mentoring that four clear emergent themes became apparent:

- Knowledge of own principles in order to develop a sense of purpose and the confidence to mentor
- Opportunities to make sense of processes and frameworks for mentoring and understand what is required
- Having support and resourcing for mentoring to aid understanding what is, and what is not possible
- Developing relationships and reflecting on these to develop pedagogically excellent mentoring practice

Mentors clearly acknowledged and expressed their own firmly held principles and could explain how this has led to a sense of purpose and confidence in what they are doing. They also felt that the new way that they were now working offered opportunities for them to make sense of the processes and frameworks designed to support them. The partnership evaluation framework and documentation that outlines expectations, along with attending placement lectures with students, all supported their understanding of the components and aims of the initial teacher education programmes. Support and resourcing was valued and felt to be having an effect as it helped to delineate where the boundaries of mentors' roles and that of the link tutors met and helped them to understand what was and what was not possible. Mentors also drew clear links between developing relationships with link tutors and student teachers and saw how these aided the development of pedagogically excellent mentoring practice: for example, they valued link tutors conducting joint lesson observations along with positive feedback from students and school colleagues.

Discussing what supports mentors' professional development as mentors through our findings from the project was the point at which we realized that this also supports us as researchers too! We continued to consider these factors alongside a consideration of our own development as researchers through reflection and discussions which we systematically recorded using audio, reflective pieces, conversations and emails. We substituted the word mentoring for researching and we saw that the same things appeared to support us too.

Looking back over the project, frameworks and structures were essential to our learning as researchers. Jill had encouraged regular meetings and communications during the initial stages. Seizing diverse opportunities as they arose were also important, such as applying for funding for an international study visit to the Netherlands where two members of the team observed an educational system with similarities to our own along with some fundamental differences (e.g. emphasis on research in developing pre service teachers). This helped us to question our own practice and sparked some really interesting conversations about possibilities. We put ourselves forward for two faculty conferences and presented papers at them and the Head of School identified the Association of Teacher Educators October conference as an international opportunity for us and enabled us to apply for faculty

funding to attend. In addition to this we have taken advantage of faculty arranged writing away-days and this is where we collaboratively wrote our first, article which imminently going to be published in a professional development publication for teachers.

'The opportunities keep coming and, as we take on these risky activities, we are slowly becoming people who feel confident to call themselves researchers'. (Hannah, conversation, July 2017)

We have had to decide what was realistic in the time that we had and we shared out the responsibilities for the project between us and brought our learning back into the group. We have developed strong relationships within the group as a result of regular reflection and consideration of practice.

'The collaboration works within the group but there is also a need for each individual to work independently to gather evidence, do writing and so on and this is what fuels the group. Colleagues have been willing to be honest and make themselves vulnerable, making the group meetings a safe space without which the work could not have progressed as it did' (Jill, reflection, September 2017)

Being in a group that enables the members to expose their vulnerabilities is crucial in supporting teacher educators' professional learning (Jordan-Daus, Wilson and Vincent, 2014; Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2016). We both support and challenge each other and this has meant that we are in a good position to support new members this year. We have become self-sustaining. Whilst there are still relationships of hierarchy and dependence, there is clearly some sort of apprenticeship of learning happening (Vanassche and Keltchtermans, 2016).

'Another risky activity for me was to lead a workshop in the Partnership Conference last month. Last year, I attended the conference for the first time, looking up to the workshop leaders that presented. This year I led a workshop. It was terrifying for me to be sent a list of the participants and their roles for my workshop a couple of days before the conference. What could I share that would be of interest to people of this calibre? It has struck me today, that fear is a real barrier to creativity'. (Hannah, reflection, July 2017)

Taking a risk and participating in new research activities requires courage and determination. Going public with our work was acknowledged as being scary and placed the team in a vulnerable position. We were sharing our research about mentoring at our own mentoring conference held in our university and therefore opened ourselves up to critique. We also began to write about our experiences for publication. This was a defining moment for one of the team and demonstrates the beginnings of the development of a research identity (Griffiths, Thompson and Hryniewitz, 2014; Swennen, 2010)

5.1 Conclusion

There is growing recognition that successful professional development programmes articulate 'well thought through ideas about the learning process' (Moon et al, 2000 p4). This research team has benefitted from the thinking of the senior leaders within the faculty. An important part of this is in the induction of new professionals through collaborative self-development opportunities. Building independence and resilience as well as encouraging pro-activeness and initiative together are an important way of achieving this. A sense of purpose also appears to be important. The research team have benefitted from the mentoring approach taken by the Head of School and Research facilitators and critical friends to the project. Personal support appears to be equally important to mentors and teacher educators; both the collaboration and teamwork that the partnership fosters in order to support student teachers as well as support provided for their individual roles.

Mentors are very conscious of their responsibility as 'gatekeepers to the profession'. In a similar way, the Head of School and Jill, as experienced research facilitators, aim to uphold standards. They recognise this as a challenging and demanding aspect of their roles. In recognising the need to ensure that professional standards are kept, they acknowledge that there is a requirement to act if these are not upheld. This was seen in the meeting where the team discovered that their research questions were not appropriate. Being a mentor and guide does not appear to be without its tensions.

While the faculty organises many opportunities for teacher educator researcher development, what appears distinctive in this research has been the opportunity to participate in and generate ideas for a live research project affecting both our daily work and the future of our faculty. We all share a sense of mission, which is to raise the status of mentoring and recognize the value of professional learning but we have come to realise that our own professional learning as teacher educator researchers is also integral to that of our mentors' professional learning. All aspects of this are interrelated as we seek to make meaning and move forward together.

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