Mentoring Beginner Teachers—issues for schools to anticipate and manage

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The focus of this article is the school-based mentoring process which supports the initial training of teachers in any of its present routes. We draw as much from practical application and experience of mentoring as from theoretical frameworks.

The Context

Those involved in the initial training of teachers, articled teachers and licensed teachers as well as the induction and support of newly-qualified teachers will be aware of the changes that have taken place over recent months. In whatever form it takes, the hallmarks of effective initial training of teachers are likely to include the following:

—it is an active process of learning, involving a number of parties;
—it is based on practical experience;
—it aims to support beginner teachers in reflecting on their job and their development into it;
—it is a developmental process, both in terms of the period of initial training, and in terms of linking to future professional development;
—it recognises that teaching is a complex professional activity.

These hallmarks characterise effective training wherever the learning is located, be it in school or out of school. We recognise the increase in the role to be played by schools in the initial training of teachers. This increase applies not only to the time spent by students in the school setting, but also to the role that schools play in liaison, training, and assessment. Whether initial training is based in schools or

colleges, it can be beset by rituals, mythologies and rites of sorts (Stones, 1989). The aim of this article is to help schools avoid this by raising awareness about the process of mentoring and enable them to incorporate the mentoring process into initial training.

We have taken the term mentor to mean anyone who is involved in tasks and activities which support a beginner teacher. This is unlikely to refer to just one person in a school, as the professional training and induction of any teacher is a task which engages many. It therefore follows that our view of the mentor is *not* solely one of:—

—a model, for newcomers to imitate in a simple fashion;
—a bureaucrat, who merely processes information;
—a management supervisor, who is 'responsible' for the licensee;
—a counsellor, whose main task is to follow the beginner's agenda, including any personal issues.

Initial training should be handled in a way which lays down the foundations for later professional development, giving the beginner tools to carry with them into their profession. It also provides a way for the organisation to regenerate through the professional development of those involved in mentoring.

Issues for the School to Anticipate and Manage

The main issues that have arisen, during the training of beginner teachers are examined under the following headings:

—some whole school issues;
—communication issues;
—challenges and conflicts;
—resources;
—management of the learning experience;
—multiple mentors;
—the school's learning from the experience.

Whole School Issues

Schools are social organisations which have their own 'feel' or ethos. It is important that we recognise that the whole school ethos can support or undermine many aspects of professional development including that of mentoring (Joyce & Showers, 1988).

Mentoring development in any school will be affected by several factors, amongst them the ethos or culture of the organisation (Handy & Aitken, 1986), the style of management in the school, which may be through teams, political or hierarchical (Bush, 1989), the degree of connectedness and communication in the organisation which may be open and wide, well supported and resourced or closed, the view of professional development and teachers' learning which may be seen as

an essential aspect of school life, a luxury or simply a nuisance, (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 1988), and the view of initial training and trainees, which may be one of processing and socialising people into old ways and maintaining the status quo of the organisation, rather than recognising new and regenerative ideas.

Where each of the above elements manages to generate an atmosphere supporting the opportunity for challenge, change and growth, the development of mentoring is likely to be positive. In such an environment professional progression will be taken as the norm, and there will be an expectation that practice can develop and that ideas can change through a process of study, discussion, demonstration and practice.

In summary then, to best support the process of mentoring the school has to begin to move towards a situation where there is:-

—quality of practice within schools, since this is the principal focus of professional experience and sources;
—effective support to enable the processes of reflection and review to take place;
—a whole-school approach to staff development at all levels—initial training, induction and retention of staff;
—an atmosphere in the school conducive to school-based training in the terms of receptive attitudes and willingness to support trainees;
—the presence of suitable experienced teachers as potential mentors;
—the presence of suitable mentor support and training.

In such an organisation there may also be additional benefits in that there could be a reduction in the isolation which is often endemic to the lives of teachers (Joyce & Showers, 1988).

Communication Issues

Communication is needed at many levels and at various times during mentoring. The school can anticipate and ease some of these processes by clarifying what is being communicated to whom and when and then planning a method and means for the various occasions.

One aspect of communication which can be anticipated is the different needs at different stages. By dividing the process into time periods it becomes possible to analyse and begin to address beginner teachers' needs.

Before arrival. What we pass on at this stage can give the first impression, even before the first visit. It can help to build up a picture about the school and about the people in it. It should be appropriate, conveying a welcome and clearly outlining the sort of reception the beginner teacher can expect.

On arrival. At the school the beginner teacher, colleagues and pupils need different information. The school needs to be aware of and link the beginner teacher into

networks in the school. These might be formal like departmental and staff meetings but equally important are the informal arrangements like the rites for coffee and seating which may well exist in the staff room and can be the undoing of the uninitiated.

Introduction phase.   The beginner teacher is going to be a member of multiple teams and needs to be able to find a reference for himself or herself in relation to these teams. There is a need to recognise the process of role formation and definition as well as the process of teambuilding. An understanding of these dimensions can give insight into some of the needs when introducing new teachers into the school.

Main work phase.   The school will need to coordinate the information flow through-out this stage of everyone who is supporting the learner teacher, linking various teachers in school, college lecturers, and the local education authority (LEA). Setting up learning experiences and review sessions, feeding back observations and accounts and transferring information around, are all important.

Later phases and exit.   There is still a need to manage the continuous exchange and flow of information between colleagues in the school as well as with outside bodies, possibly colleges or the local education authority. This stage is also likely to include negotiated reviews as well as written reports.

   Whatever the stage, the ownership of information must be discussed and agreed so that all relevant information and how it can be used is clear and understandable to all parties. The beginner teacher must be aware of what is confidential and what is to be released. This is particularly pertinent when the beginner teacher is to gain experience from another school.

   These are some of the dimensions that will be of concern to schools as communication systems are developed which can respond to institutional needs, for example (see also Fig. 1):

   —the type of information that is being conveyed and received;
   —what method of communication is being used;
   —who is to be involved in the exchange;
   —what is the the message that is to be sent and received.

Challenges and Conflicts

Significant learning is likely to be challenging, as enquiry into areas of teaching and school life is not always comfortable. The presence of a beginner teacher can highlight issues in the organisation, and examining procedures and practice may trigger a range of reactions causing anxiety and at worst polarisation. Identifying

	Before arrival	**On arrival**	**Introduction phase**	**Later phases**
School to licensed teacher	School documentation Map of site. Who will they meet at initial meeting?	Information about systems e.g. pigeon holes, meetings.	Introductions to colleagues and pupils. How and when.	How is observation and assessment information to ber collected and conveyed. Confidentiality.
Beginner teacher to school	Past experiences. Interests in teaching.	Hopes and fears.	Aims/goals for learning.	Perspective on progress and learning.
Members of school to each other	Range of learning opportunities on offer.	Which selection of opportunities for the induction phase.	An agreed approach to introduction.	Review and progress and supervision.
School to college	Logistics of operating. individuals.	Guidelines for the process.	Setting up learning experiences.	Reports, observation and schedules.

FIG. 1. An example of a communication grid.

these conflicts as organisational or interpersonal may enable schools to pre-empt some of the difficulties.

Organisational conflicts.   Purposes and goals can differ in any organisation between:

—department–department;
—individual–departments;
—departments–school;
—individual–school.

There may be a view that "student teachers take up too much time" or affect pupil behaviour and that a department may suffer as a result of the time they take up ... "we're not here to train teachers" ... "it's all too disruptive" ... "what will parents think?". All of these comments have been heard and indicate the need for discussion and clarification.

The distribution and allocation of resources, time and money, as well as colleagues which are all needed to support beginner teachers, may be seen by some parties in the school as better used elsewhere. All of these are potential conflict areas and need to be managed. Some may be clarified in advance:

A beginner teacher could be clear about school policy with regard to:

—planning & preparation time;
—when/if they will be used for covering absence;
—when/if ever will they be used for unsupervised class responsibility;
—or exam invigilation.

Interpersonal Conflicts.   Trainees sometimes get 'owned' by individuals and departments. This can lead to possessiveness about supervision and taking sides in exchanges. The beginner teacher might pose a threat by bringing new ideas and ways of working into departments. There is also a visibility which the beginner teacher brings to the department attracting the attention of outsiders and senior colleagues. A large number of new relationships are being formed and there are likely to be tensions or conflicts in some of them. The school has to acknowledge that potential for conflict exists and that provision of time, space and resources will enable mediation and resolution in many cases.

Resources

We have categorised these in terms of time, space and additional materials.

Time.   It is important that schools recognise time as a resource and negotiate clear time for individuals to manage the process of mentoring. Below are some of the activities mentors are likely to be involved in:

—negotiation between college and school and/or outside;
—the process of mentoring;
—communication between various mentors in the school;
—release of the mentors and other staff to observe and feedback;
—planning and review of the programme;
—networking;
—training other mentors.

Schools need to anticipate the extra time needed so that it can be taken into account and built into development planning.

Space.   It is likely that staff will have established space for themselves to work in, but a mentoring role is likely to have different requirements. There are a variety of situations that mentors will be in and times when they will need somewhere undisturbed and preferably quiet. For the unestablished and uninitiated beginner teacher finding space is not so easy. The provision of a storage space for exercise books, pigeon-hole for messages and somewhere to work in relative comfort is often neglected and yet can make a real difference to the way they perceive themselves and their standing within the school.

Materials. A budget can remove some of the difficulties that arise when extra demands are placed on departmental resources. It could support the use of the photocopier, sugar paper, card etc. and enable the beginner teacher to have autonomy from the outset. Also, learning the art of control over scarce resources could be incorporated into their programme.

Management of the Learning Experience

The way that learning is managed indicates an underlying approach which is being taken to 'learning about teaching'. We identify four (with apologies to anyone named Nellie).

1. *Sitting next to Nellie.* This is still common and founded on apprenticeship models of learning. Much energy can be invested in questions of 'placement'— this poses the key question for this model: which Nellie to sit next to?
2. *Observing Nellie.* This is popular but doesn't always clarify what to observe. As one aspect it is important but not sufficient as it cannot investigate the non-observable (people's goals, perceptions etc.) and may not address the question: what is the relation of observation to action?
3. *Enquiring about Nellie.* This has developed extensively in some areas. Again it may be important to consider which Nellies to enquire of and what to do with the results.
4. *Trying out being your own Nellie.* This is reminiscent of action learning models in which the beginner is supported in their own problem-solving in a structured way at an appropriate pace.

The learning experience of any beginner teacher can be impoverished by:-

—offering them only one model or approach to learning about teaching;
—locating them within one section of school, usually the subject-specific area, disregarding other aspects of school life;
—placing them in one area with little or no structured support in the belief, and probably hope, that professional learning is about 'something rubbing off'.

It is our belief that the beginner teacher needs a planned programme of learning activities which offer range, variety and development. We also suggest a framework which can help to:

(a) conceptualise the range of learning activities a beginner teacher can usefully experience;
(b) support the process of negotiating what learning activities are most appropriate for a particular learner teacher at a particular stage.

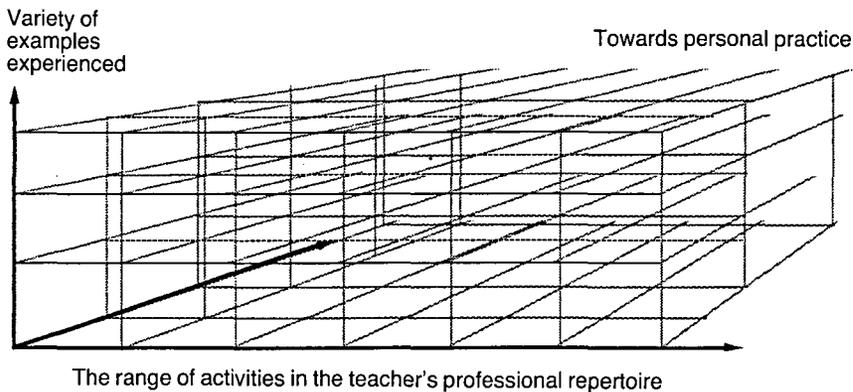The framework in Fig. 2 outlines three dimensions, each of which it is important to consider.

FIG. 2. The framework of learning for beginner teachers.

1. Range of activities—not just classrooms but the full range of the teacher's professional repertoire.
2. Variety—not just socialising the learner teacher into a single approach, but offering a range of experiences which are necessary to support contrasts and evaluation on which reflection depends.
3. Towards personal practice—not just observation, but moving from observation to investigation and to action.

Variety.   To observe and learn from different approaches; to learn that different groups of pupils respond differently to the same stimulus; to experiment with approaches and styles.

Range.   To recognise the fullness of a teacher's role and to avoid devaluing the non-classroom aspects. Deliberately including aspects such as talking to individual pupils, parental links, experiences outside the school and perhaps in other schools.

Towards personal practice.   To give some purpose to observation and investigation; to promote the application of learning; to start the process of professional development for their ensuing years.

What follows from this?

1. **Choice**—If learning needs can be discussed choice can be managed with the learner and 'placement' does not become the central issue.
2. **Negotiation**—not everything about a learner's programme can be planned in

advance and this reminds us of the need to treat beginner teachers as individuals. We need to be able to discuss starting points and learning needs: what the learner feels they have presently achieved and what they feel confident about tackling next. We then can translate needs into appropriate learning experiences offering a variety of situations across the range. Debriefing by different colleagues can all enrich the experience.

3. **Progression.** This needs to be planned and discussed instead of "throwing someone in at the deep end". Progression can be planned through stages of observation or investigation, reviewing and learning from that experience and subsequently building it into personal action and practice.

The School's Learning from the Experience

Schools may vary in the degree to which they recognise that they will learn from the experience of working with beginner teachers. This can be reflected in their reasons for having beginner teachers in the first place, and indeed in their reasons for having had them for the last number of years.

You might recognise some of the following categories adapted from Joyce *et al.* (1983):

—"we like having the young things around" (but we don't intend to change): the superficially accepting school?
—"we do it because we're asked to": the non-learning school?
—"we look forward to the work and to learning from them": the receptive school?
—"they always get put here" (it's a habit): the passive consuming school?
—"we don't want them in here": the entrenched school?

School ⇇ ⟶ Beginner teacher

It is important to anticipate that learning may be two-way. This is not always recognised, nor even always valued, and when it is recognised it becomes possible to incorporate that learning into the wider life of the school.

Multiple Mentors

We have not focused on one person as Mentor though one individual may coordinate the experience, retaining an overview of the process and being aware of the time line for development. We recognise that a number of people will become involved and have outlined an approach which suggests a whole-school view of mentoring. In such a view parallels and links are made with further professional development in the school and to other areas of supervision such as supportive appraisal.

The process of learning to teach must involve a variety of planned experiences which should be devised and built upon by many colleagues all of whom are part of

a mentoring process and who at various times will be mentors to the beginner teacher. The selection of a coordinator in a senior position is important because there will be a need for communication and review.

A team of mentors can be built from different parts of the school in order to offer the widest possible experiences. We should also recognise that the mentors themselves will have particular strengths, abilities and qualities; in this way we can ensure that the beginner teacher is being offered a range of ways of learning.

Conclusion

In developing resources for initial teacher training (Watkins & Whalley, 1993) we develop a view of important knowledge and understanding which is required somewhere in the system for initial training of teachers to take place. As has been stated before, we do not conclude that all such knowledge and understanding needs to reside in *one* person labelled a mentor. It will also be clear that we do not cover the content knowledge that teachers need, being convinced that our colleagues in schools and colleges are more than able to adapt our process framework to meet their needs.

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