Critical Reflection and Authentic Mentoring Relationships in Initial Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that mentoring relationships between student teachers and lecturers can be enhanced when lecturers participate in personal critical reflections of their role and practice. Current literature acknowledges the need for successful practice-based mentoring and assessment relationships, with students stating these relationships support their professional growth. Mentoring is defined as a connection that encompasses nurturing, guiding, and encouraging. The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) lecturer role includes supporting a student teacher to develop their own understandings of critical reflection however the journey of reflection must begin with the lecturer. Lecturers using this approach to mentoring relationships will cultivate authentic and meaningful connections for student teachers, leading to successful outcomes. This article explores why lecturers themselves must engage in critical reflection when mentoring student teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) ITE. This article reflects concepts gathered from the research I completed towards a master's degree that explored mentoring and power relations within ECE ITE, specifically focussing on the relationships between student teachers and their lecturer mentors. Reflections on my research and the implications these reflections have for my current role and practice as an ECE ITE lecturer will be explored within this article.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is regarded as an essential component of teaching and learning (Aubrey, 2011; Hudson, 2016; Rodd, 2013). Mentoring processes that are effective can increase teacher confidence and leadership (Aubrey, 2011) and The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2019) specifies the importance mentoring has on pedagogical knowledge development. My role as a regional lecturer for the Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) degree, with an ITE provider in Aotearoa New Zealand, prompted me to choose the research topic for my thesis. A significant part of this role involves mentoring student teachers on their practicum placement. Within ITE programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand, a

practicum placement refers to the student's full-time placement in a teacher-led early childhood setting (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019).

The five-week practicum placement requires student teachers to engage in reflective practice and documentation, where they construct their own understanding as they learn, setting goals for their practicum experience. My role involves giving feedback, guidance, and observing students against a range of written and practical tasks to support their developing professional competencies as ECE teachers. When the student teacher is on practicum a qualified and skilled associate teacher takes the day-to-day responsibility for guiding them. While both the associate teacher and lecturer support and guide the student teacher, the lecturer has the responsibility for the summative element of the assessment from the ITE programme the student teacher is enrolled in (Aspden, 2014).

This article will outline what the literature says about mentoring relationships, followed by the methodology employed in this study and the subsequent discussion, which will explore three main ideas: firstly, how the ITE lecturer role includes supporting a student teacher to develop their own understandings of critical reflection; secondly, the idea that mentoring relationships between student teachers and lecturers can be enhanced when lecturers themselves participate in critical reflections of their role and practice; and lastly, that lecturers using this approach to mentoring relationships will grow authentic connections for student teachers, leading to successful outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Practice-based mentoring specifically supports the critical reflection of practice alongside the development of reflective dialogue (Education Council, 2015). Mentors must empower others to think critically and reflect on their own practice, consequently generating opportunities for professional progress (Cameron, 2007). Critically reflective practice encourages student teachers to improve and strengthen their learning and teaching skills and engage in critical perspectives on their practices (McDonald, 2004; Robertson, 2009). Critical reflection also empowers individuals to evaluate their practice and consider possibilities, developing new understandings that can advise and strengthen their practice (Wexler, 2019). Being involved in critical reflection aids practitioners to grow, learn and consider ideas from different perspectives, exploring views that could differ from their own (Jarvis, 1992).

Authentic mentoring that is meaningful and relevant to mentees must combine professional knowledge with reflective practice, and mentors must have the skills that provide student teachers with opportunities for reflection (Murphy & Butcher, 2011). Holloway (2001) suggests that a mentor's support and skill at guiding a new teacher is crucial. Literature tells us that to effectively embrace professional learning opportunities, learners must engage in reflective practice (Rodd, 2006). Therefore, a mentor's role must include supporting critical reflection, specifically helping learners to develop these skills to enhance their professional learning (Kupila et al., 2017).

Mentoring relationships between student teachers and lecturers can be enhanced when lecturers themselves participate in critical reflections of their role and practice. While supportive relationships with effective communication are key

for successful mentoring relationships, the development of these supportive relationships requires mentors to position themselves as learners and be open to self-reflection (Fullan, 2011; Hudson, 2016; Warren, 2014). Robertson (2009) suggests mentors to be open to new ideas and to question existing processes, reflecting on the leader as the learner with mentors being both a teacher and a learner. Definitions of mentoring in recent years propose a reciprocal relationship where both the mentee and mentor benefit, with knowledge constructed through shared perspectives and viewpoints, rather than the mentor simply transferring knowledge to the mentee in a traditional approach (Ellis et al., 2020).

Hudson (2016) suggests those in leadership roles must be self-reflective, considering how they position themselves within these relationships. For leadership to be successful, it must be authentic, and while a leadership role differs from that of a mentor's role, parallel features of leadership can be linked to mentoring (Evans, 2000; Rodd, 2013). When acknowledging the similarities between leadership and mentoring, a bicultural perspective on leadership must be considered and is important in Aotearoa New Zealand, with Tamati et al. (2008) referring to different ways of knowing, being and doing.

Cherrington and Thornton (2013) highlight the importance of individuals being supported to share their own knowledge. Mentors must intentionally demonstrate a willingness to accept other views, valuing all for who they are and what they contribute, and consider alternative ways of doing things (Colmar, 2017; Gordon-Burns et al., 2012).

A trusting environment that respects and tolerates alternative views--with a culture of listening—is needed when leading and mentoring (Rodd, 2013). Mentors must be models of good practice and be supported and guided to ensure they develop the crucial skills for mentoring, being prepared to do what they are asking others to do, reflecting the principle of Manaakitanga, which embraces care and respect (Hook et al., 2007; MacDonald, 2004). Hobson et al. (2009) refer to this as *visibility*, i.e. leading by example and role modelling best practice.

According to Brouwer et al. (2017), lecturers using a critically reflective approach to mentoring relationships will nurture authentic connections for student teachers, leading to successful outcomes. Research on authenticity in mentoring relationships focusses heavily on the need for qualities, such as trust and integrity, to be evident in mentoring relationships (Rouse & Spradbury, 2016; Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014). Research from Brouwer et al. (2017) included an organisational self-review on mentoring practices and found authenticity as necessary for successful mentoring, with the mentors' attitudes being influential on the mentee. Authenticity generates respect and prioritises values such as integrity and humility. Authentic mentoring considers different ways of knowing and being, appreciating each student teacher as unique (Brouwer et al., 2017).

Relationships between lecturer mentor and student teacher are so significant that a mentor's attitude can make a difference to whether the practicum is successful or not (Aspden, 2014; MacDonald, 2004). Literature highlights that attitudes of a mentor can either limit or extend student teachers learning opportunities (Aspden, 2014; McConnell, 2011; Varney, 2012). Research from Smith et al. (2012) acknowledges that, when authentic and trustworthy relationships are in place, quality learning dialogues can arise and opportunities for growth and transformation occur. Research from Ellis et al. (2020) stresses how positive relationships increase reciprocity for student teachers, and a mentor's mindset can significantly impact the learning that occurs.

Relationships are key to our bicultural context in Aotearoa New Zealand and connections are central for Māori (Ritchie & Rau, 2008). Whanaungatanga is focused on developing and sustaining relationships and Manaakitanga hinges on caring and loving others. Ako is also relevant and considers that relationships are reciprocal where teachers are positioned as learners and vice versa (Ministry of Education, 2011). These Te Ao Māori concepts are relevant for mentoring, and they come from a worldview that is influenced by whānau, hapū and iwi and individuals' experiences and connections (Hart, 2010; Hook et al., 2007).

This literature review set out to examine research on mentoring relationships and the benefits of mentoring, along with the place critical reflection has in mentoring relationships. It is clear from existing literature that authentic mentoring relationships can support students to progress toward their goal of becoming effective teachers, consequently acknowledging the importance of mentoring in this context. The literature identified that authentic relationships between mentor and mentee can positively affect a student's developing professional identity, and effective mentoring relationships must be reflective, honest, and helpful with mentors being committed to their mentees.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study captured the participants' experiences and perspectives using an interpretivist and social constructionist approach, allowing for the voices of my participants to be heard through semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research was appropriate for this study as it investigates real world scenarios and supports participants to offer their experiences through engaging in rich dialogue (MacNaughton et al., 2010). Qualitative researchers construct their perceptions of reality through their own individual context along with cultural, social, and historical contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

There were eight participants in the semi-structured interviews, who met the following inclusion criteria: five former graduated students who completed the Bachelor of Teaching degree (ECE) within the last three years, and three lecturers who have been previously employed in an ITE programme and engaged in mentoring relationships with ECE student teachers in practicum situations. The participants all studied and worked in the same ITE programme. The student pseudonyms are Alex, Kate, James, and Ann. The lecturer pseudonyms are Abby, Lilly, and Jeanette.

The student participants involved were all registered teachers working in a variety of early childhood services within the sector. These include kindergarten, private preschool, and mixed age childcare. The lecturers were all registered teachers that have extensive knowledge and skills of working in teacher education programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand, each with a career in ECE spanning 30 plus years. The participants were approached through an initial email and selected based on their relevant experience to share and contribute to the research. Locality was a factor due to the disruptions from Covid-19, as not having to travel was preferred.

My research theory developed from the collected data, and I analysed data to identify the emerging themes which allowed theories to develop without expected outcomes (Bell & with Waters, 2014; McNaughton et al., 2010). Through using individual and group semi-structured interviews in my research, I

focused on understanding participants at a deeper level including their thoughts and feelings, aiming to comprehend the social and cultural contexts of the world in which they live (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tuli, 2010). As a first-time researcher, I used a researcher journal to help me track my ideas, reflect, and record my thinking. Using the data collected in my research, this article explores how critical reflection can enhance the work that lecturer mentors do in ECE ITE.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this research project support the premise that authentic mentoring relationships can develop student teachers' understandings of critical reflection. All quotes below are from participants' individual or group interviews. The following discussion reveals three key themes that emerged: (i) the ECE ITE lecturer role includes supporting a student teacher to develop their own understandings of critical reflection; (ii) the idea that mentoring relationships between student teachers and lecturers can be enhanced when lecturers themselves participate in critical reflections of their role and practice; and (iii) that lecturers using this approach to mentoring relationships will grow authentic connections with student teachers, leading to successful outcomes.

Supporting authentic relationships to develop critical reflection
The findings of my research show that both lecturer mentors and student teachers want authentic relationships. The notion of authenticity being important in mentoring relationships was shared by the participants of my research, with Alex expressing the importance of "mentors being genuine". Authentic relationships and support are essential for student teachers while they make sense of new learning and experiences, and lecturer mentors need to be experts in their field and hold current knowledge to guide the teaching and learning of their mentees. These relationships support them to develop the practice of critical reflection through constructive debate, discussion and respect for others' ideas, where trust and respect are forefront.

The students interviewed all recognised that having critically reflective conversations when in a mentoring relationship supported their learning to develop further. James said that "having open and honest discussions makes you reflect on your practice" with professional discussions providing opportunities to think about personal strengths and areas of improvement. Data showed that supportive constructive advice from a lecturer was important to extend and develop learning for mentees, with Kate saying it was "always good" to critically reflect, and James acknowledging "there is always something you can improve on". Participating student teachers' perceptions of quality mentoring relationships suggest that these relationships help them to make sensitive decisions about their teaching practice, reinforcing their developing pedagogies and teacher identity.

An important finding from my research is the need for lecturers to understand the individual mentee and how they think and learn. Data revealed that student teacher participants want mentors that recognised the different ways in which students learn, which is exemplified by Kate who said that "everyone must be treated as an individual, because not everybody learns the same". When discussing teaching and learning for mentees this must be a priority. This works in synergy with deepening relationships as the more authentic the relationships

the more individuals understand each other. Aspden (2014) further recognises practicum placements as a complex balance of teaching and learning, and my research findings suggest that authentic mentoring relationships must be developed between mentoring lecturers and student teachers during this time.

Positive relationships and communication ensure the student teachers feel supported and encouraged. Easy dialogue is a necessary component in mentoring relationships and when effective communication is present, mentoring relationships can be successful with both mentor and mentee having space to critically reflect and contribute honestly (Raelin, 2014). Communication that is open can support the exploration of values and beliefs where new ideas are embraced and individuals are not undermined. When mentees feel safe in mentoring relationships, they will be open to teaching and learning opportunities (Robinson et al., 2009). Findings from my research show that lecturer participants are committed to communicating honestly, and, whilst some conversations were undoubtedly challenging, all lecturers stated authenticity to be essential, with Jeanette saying, "I try to be consistently authentic and honest, and just be me". The student teacher participants also acknowledged the need for supportive and caring lecturer mentors during practicum placements, with Alex stating that "supportive and genuine relationships are key". Student teachers in this study wanted opportunities to build connections and develop open communication, and findings from the lecturer mentors also acknowledged the importance of this. Abby, for example, indicated that "conversation must flow, and be comfortable and open" while Lilly stressed the importance of "genuinely listening with honest responses".

Different ways of knowing and being enhance critical reflection

When lecturers participate in critical reflection of their role and practice, relationships with student teachers can be enhanced. In particular, reflecting on new ways of engaging with student teachers ensures mentors remain open to learning. This acknowledges the concept of Ako in Te Ao Māori, accepting the knowledge that both teachers and learners contribute to learning exchanges, and recognises the way that new information can develop out of collective learning opportunities (Pere, 1982). Reflecting on these relationships embrace shared power, and a sense of connectedness becomes central to mentoring (Berryman et al., 2018, Owen, 2014).

My findings suggest that lecturer mentors want to remain open to learn, positioning themselves as both a learner and a teacher. Lilly accepted the importance of every student approaching learning differently and the need to "recognise each student's Mana". This is an important finding as respect and authenticity are nurtured when different ways of knowing and being are embraced, enhancing mentoring relationships. Jeanette said it was important to find out "who they are, and what they know, and bring out the best in the students". Ako is central when thinking about power relations in mentoring relationships in our bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand. This concept can turn normal hierarchical paradigms upside down, suggesting that teachers can learn from students and removing the idea that teachers know everything. This challenges some traditional approaches to mentoring, supporting the reduction of power relations and promoting inclusivity.

The student teacher participants shared the importance of lecturer mentors recognising the knowledge they have and bring with them into the

practicum experience. Ann shared that "respecting the knowledge of the student is necessary" for those mentoring student teachers. Findings also found that it is important for mentors to get a picture of each individual and where they are at with their learning. Alex talked about the importance of mentors reflecting on how well they knew their mentees, stating that "forming good relationships was key". Mentors allowing mentees to be themselves and showing them that they are valued was recognised in the data, and Lilly explained that she tried "to help students raise their own identity, recognising them as individuals".

If mentees are valued and understood, then the learning moments for mentees in mentoring relationships will be enhanced. Āta is a Māori principle that requires individuals to be thoughtful and considerate and, when applied to interpersonal relationships like mentoring, can support respectful teaching and learning relationships (Pohatu, 2013). The establishment of these respectful relationships for learning and teaching embrace Māori concepts and values within our bicultural context of teaching and learning within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Critical reflection improves connections

Lecturers using a critically reflective approach to mentoring relationships will improve connections for student teachers. My findings show that within mentoring relationships lecturers are well advised to make students feel at ease, ensuring they are supported in ways that develop connections. James talked about students wanting more opportunities to work alongside lecturers to reduce feelings of intimidation and power, creating authentic connections, and Alex stating that "time spent developing relationships" was important. The student teacher participants in my research suggested that having more opportunities to build genuine connections with lecturer mentors was important and Kate thought that "more opportunities to meet" would be helpful.

The concept in Te Ao Māori of Whanaungatanga is integral to working respectfully in our bicultural nation of Aotearoa New Zealand. Whanaungatanga is about relationships, and it values links between communities and the relationships developed through working together (Ritchie & Rau, 2008). My findings recognise Whanaungatanga, showing that the students think that the collective is important, and the whole community of teachers needs to be active during practicums. Ann highlighted that "working together" and "lots of people nurturing the person" would benefit the students in mentoring relationships.

Furthering these relationships and taking the time to get to know mentees was a suggestion from all three lecturers interviewed, with participants saying it is about "making connections" and "reaching out to students to support that relationship developing" (Abby). This indicates that mentees feeling safe in mentoring relationships will be open to teaching and learning opportunities, and lecturer mentors reflecting on the connections they have with student mentors is essential. Jeanette said it was important that "students felt safe to be themselves". Findings from this study further reveal the importance to have existing relationships when it comes to practicum visits. Abby commented that to "meet informally prior to the practicum starting formally" can establish more connection and potentially deepen mentoring relationships.

The lecturer participants in my research also shared their understanding of the need to constantly reflect on their way of working with student teachers. Jeanette explained that it was important that she examined how she interacted and engaged with student teachers, saying ''I just try to be myself and keep it

authentic". All lecturer participants acknowledged the power imbalance in the mentoring relationship between themselves and student teachers, acknowledging how genuine connections reduced this power imbalance. Jeanette said she tried hard to "tune into what the student has to offer". Findings revealed that by being reflective on their practice, such power relations can be acknowledged and connections for student teachers improved, and Lilly shared that she always "communicated explicitly with the student about what she was looking for".

CONCLUSION

Mentoring relationships support mentees to develop and refine their practice and skills, guiding them as their professional identity matures (Thornton, 2015). Therefore, it is important that these mentoring relationships are productive and genuine. Practice-based mentoring and assessment relationships are an integral part of a student teacher's journey in becoming a qualified and professional teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Council, 2015; Thornton, 2015). The findings from the data and the literature discloses that understanding the complexities of these mentoring relationships includes having an awareness of the importance critical reflection has on practice, and the success critical reflection can bring to these mentoring relationships.

This article has explored the idea that for student teachers to develop their own understanding of critical reflection, lecturers themselves must engage in critical reflection of their role and practice. The findings from this study highlight the importance of lecturer mentors reflecting and reviewing their practices. As discussed above, the benefits of embracing different ways of knowing and being are valuable. Adopting such approaches that nurture authenticity will close the gap between lecturers and students, working towards reducing the power imbalances that inevitably exist in these relationships. In essence, mentors sharing about themselves and displaying vulnerability supports authentic connections to be developed and embraces the mentee as a person. It is important to consider what mentees can bring into the mentoring relationship with them and consider that mentors must always remain open to learn, reflecting on the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning (Ako Aotearoa. n.d.).

By cultivating authentic mentoring relationships Te Ao Māori concepts are acknowledged and embraced, which is vital when teaching and learning within Aotearoa New Zealand. Upon reflection, by opening ourselves up and being authentic, connections can grow creating a deeper sense of purpose for those in mentoring relationships. Seeing mentees growing their sense of belonging and passion for learning can be a rewarding aspect of the ECE ITE lecturer role.

Waiho i te toipoto, kaua i te toiroa.
(Let us keep close together, not wide apart).

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