Effective Educative Mentoring Skills: A Collaborative Effort

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ABSTRACT

Teacher induction programmes provide critical support for new teachers moving into teaching. The focus of this paper is to examine and identify the specific understandings, attitudes and skills educative mentors require in supporting Provisionally Registered Teachers' (PRTs) learning. The research for this paper is based on a qualitative approach grounded in the interpretive tradition. Qualitative data were collected from 17 mentor teachers in the form of semi-structured one-to-one interviews which were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach. Based on the findings the specific understandings, attitudes and skills required by mentor teachers in effective educative mentoring with PRTs are: excellent curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, being an effective and reflective practitioner, clear communication skills, and personal skills of supportiveness and understanding. These findings are important for professional development and practice in induction and mentoring programmes in New Zealand. The findings of this study and the implications that have arisen must be considered within the context and size of the study.

Keywords

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Auckland primary and intermediate mentoring and induction pilot, within which this study was conducted, is one of four induction and mentoring pilots funded by the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC). The overall aim of all the pilots is to explore a range of models for mentor teacher development and support and trial the draft Guidelines for Induction and Mentoring Programmes and for Mentor Teacher Development in Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2009). The pilots have been carried out in a range of school settings and with a range of models for high quality mentoring and induction programmes. The Auckland pilot (from which this paper evolved) specifically aimed to provide insight into how the national induction system and school practices combine to support PRTs' learning and development. Integral to the investigation was the complexity of mentor and provisionally registered teacher learning processes. Six schools participated in the pilot – four primary (two rural primary) (ages 5-10) and two intermediate (ages 11-13) schools. The schools taking part in the pilot incorporated a range of deciles (based on socio-economic funding).

INTRODUCTION

In a survey of provisionally registered teachers in New Zealand, most participants reported not receiving the level of support, mentoring and assessment to which they were entitled (Cameron, Dingle, & Brooking, 2007). The lack of this structural support made the teachers feel that they were expected to work independently and seek out assistance from others or find their own way. In order to create more support research has suggested that all agencies and individuals involved should develop comprehensive and aligned approaches to teacher induction programmes. Cameron *et al.* further suggested that beginning teachers should have access to the knowledge and thinking of their more expert colleagues within an integrated professional culture.

For teachers in their first and second year of teaching, the types of mentoring support needed are both psychologically and instructionally related. Retaining capable teachers is a challenge in many countries including New Zealand (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2005). When one considers that PRTs make tremendous progress during their first two years in the classroom then addressing the issue of shortage of high-quality teachers is more about retention than it is about recruitment (Olesen, 2000). The responsibilities and issues of teaching and learning that PRTs encounter are no different to those of their more experienced colleagues and therefore this transcends the need for more emotional support (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Despite their intensive preservice training and preparation for teaching, 'beginning teachers have legitimate learning needs that cannot be grasped in advance or outside the contexts of teaching' (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, p.26), thus reinforcing further the importance of educative mentoring.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A STRUCTURE IN THE INDUCTION PROCESS

An effective induction process is identified as a system for learning that occurs in a particular phase of a teacher's career (Britton, Paine, Pimm, & Raizen, 2003; Cameron, 2007) and one which is essential in retaining and supporting new teachers. Researchers (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn & Fideler, 1999) have concluded that induction is more likely to be effective where national, regional or state policies and resources enabled the delivery of a coordinated system over time. The authors continued, stating that all effective induction programmes should incorporate three basic characteristics, including: being comprehensive (i.e., an organization or structure that consists of many activities and where many people are involved); being coherent (i.e., the various activities and people involved are logically connected to each other); and, being sustainable (i.e., the comprehensive and coherent programme continues for many years). Portner (2005) added to this arguing that comprehensive, sustained and coherent induction programmes will most likely demonstrate improved teaching for PRTs and student learning and outcomes.

In order for successful induction of PRTs to take place, it is important that other teachers within the schools are involved and supportive. Norman and Feiman-Nemser (2005) described this integrated professional culture within a school as one which explicitly values teachers' professional growth. The seminal

work of Kardos, Moore-Johnson, Peske, Kauffman and Liu (2001) proposed that when an integrated school culture of both veteran and beginning teachers model the school philosophy with the PRT, the beginning teachers are more likely to become part of the school's professional community of learners.

WHAT IS EDUCATIVE MENTORING?

PRT mentoring in teaching has evolved over the past 10 years. During this time there has been a shift in emphasis from short-term practical advice and emotional support to a process with the potential to strengthen teaching throughout a teaching career (Cameron, 2007). This particular type of mentoring demands a vision of good teaching and a regard for beginning teachers as learners, leading to a more principled approach in the long term of improving student learning and outcomes. Educative mentoring can be distinguished from other forms of mentoring (primarily about technical advice and emotional support) in that it responds to the present needs of the teacher, assisting them in their own learning and the learning of the students (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005). It can be concluded, then, that educative mentoring is based on experiences that promote future growth and lead to richer subsequent experiences (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). It can be further argued that educative mentoring rests on an explicit vision of good teaching, and that mentors who share this vision address beginning teachers' concerns and questions about their teaching and progress (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Langdon (2007) stated that educative mentoring is a robust form of professional development which links practice to a view of good teaching, has a developmental (but not linear) view of learning to teach, and engages PRTs in serious professional conversations. It is important, therefore, in educative mentoring that the mentor's level of expertise be recognised and acknowledged, as they bring to their roles a repertoire of skills and knowledge (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005).

Educative mentoring is dependent on the mentor having an overt understanding and recognition of what excellent teaching and learning looks like and entails. The NZTC Draft Guidelines (2009) define high quality mentoring as an experienced colleague who is skilled and resourced with time, recognition and training to guide, support, give feedback to and facilitate evidence informed reflective learning conversations with the PRT. An 'educative' mentor in this sense is not merely a 'buddy' providing emotional support and 'just-in-time tips to the PRT' (NZTC, 2009, p.1). Such a mentor would provide the professional support needed by a new teacher and be able to progress their understanding of teaching and learning without neglecting the emotional support needed to make these teachers feel at ease (Little, 1990, as cited in Feiman-Nemser, 2001). As Feiman-Nemser explained, educative mentoring advances the development of new teachers by 'cultivating a disposition of inquiry, focusing attention on student thinking and understanding, and fostering disciplined talk about problems of practice' (p.28).

The importance of educative mentoring for PRTs
The conceptual framework of this study is based on the premise that educative mentor teachers need an excellent understanding and knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy and specific attitudes and skills in working with PRTs. The learning and knowledge gained from mentor teachers will assist PRTs to become more effective teachers who make a difference to student learning outcomes. These points link to Hargreave's (2003) conceptual framework which suggested the importance of providing beginning teachers with the opportunity to develop meaningful, professional and community networks within school environments (O'Doherty & Deegan, 2009).

The notion and value of learning communities has been widely documented (Bullough, 1996). Darling-Hammond (1996) argued that teachers who have access to more enriched professional roles and collegial support felt more positive about the profession. In successful learning communities, therefore, PRTs would feel more effective and more able to focus on student learning outcomes thus reinforcing the importance and relevance of effective induction programmes.

Emotional support, however, has been shown to be helpful in boosting the confidence of beginning teachers, enabling them to put difficult experiences into perspective, which increases their morale and job satisfaction. In a review of literature, Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson (2009) suggested that the most commonly stated benefits of mentoring related to the provision of emotional and psychological support. This research also acknowledged the impact of mentoring on the developing capabilities of PRTs and most notably their classroom management skills. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) also confirmed that emotional support is one of the strongest needs of beginning teachers, and that it is sometimes too easy to lose sight of the emotional dimensions of teaching.

METHOD

The research for this paper is based on a qualitative approach grounded in the interpretive tradition. For the purposes of this paper (which evolved from the Auckland pilot) the researchers have interpreted and evaluated the challenges the mentor teachers overcame in their own school contexts while exploring and developing the understanding, attitudes and skills necessary to focus on PRT learning and the development of their teaching.

Participants
Six purposively selected state schools are participating in the Auckland primary and intermediate mentoring and induction pilot. These schools were deliberately selected because of their geographical location and close proximity to each other. It was therefore more practical for the mentor teachers to attend professional development sessions at a central location. In each school, principals, mentor teachers, PRTs and other staff were all included and invited to participate in the pilot project. The 17 participants (identified hereafter with pseudonyms) in this particular paper were the mentor teachers from the six selected schools. The participants were primarily female, of varied ages and experience in the mentoring role.

Data collection and analysis
Qualitative data were collected from each of the 17 mentor teachers in the form of semi-structured one-to-one interviews during the first year of the project which were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach. The themes arose from a coding system which included open coding at the first level of conceptual analysis of the data, followed by axial coding where the relationship between the categories or themes was identified. Finally selective coding was used to identify and look back over the data and findings. The limitation on the study was that it was a small sample in one geographical area in New Zealand.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study are outlined in specific themes to show the *understandings* (the necessity of excellent curriculum and pedagogical knowledge), *attitudes* (the importance of being an effective and reflective practitioner), and *skills* (the importance of clear communication skills and having personal skills of supportiveness and understanding) educative mentors require in their mentoring role.

1. Understandings

Curriculum Knowledge
It was explicit from the mentoring conversations that mentors were aware of the importance and necessity of excellent and up-to-date curriculum knowledge. This meant they thought it was not only important to have that curriculum knowledge but were able to apply the knowledge in classroom practice and discuss it with PRTs.

As Helen commented:

> *You need to know, have a good knowledge of the curriculum, planning, assessment and you need to have a good knowledge of what it's like to be a PRT as well in your beginning years.*

Further mentors felt it was important to have empathy and compassion for a teacher at the beginning of their teaching career and to clearly understand what acquiring a lot of knowledge in curriculum areas entails.
Two other mentor teachers commented also on the importance of curriculum knowledge.

> *I think you need to have a curriculum knowledge, a knowledge specially with our school-based curriculum you need to know what the school is doing, the values and things you are trying to put into your school.* (Sue)

> *Well I think you need to have good knowledge of the curriculum and you need to be up to date with your professional reading for whatever is happening out there …* (Nicola)

All these factors are acknowledged in the NZTC Guidelines (7.1) which state it is important for mentor teachers to know about learners and learning in relation to pedagogical content knowledge and curriculum knowledge relevant to the PRT's teaching.

Pedagogical knowledge
The next group of findings link back to the importance of mentor teachers having sound pedagogical knowledge. There was general agreement from the mentors that a broad understanding of education and content knowledge, knowledge of different learning styles and a depth of knowledge about how learners learn was essential.

As Nick commented:

> *… mentor teachers need to know about current theories of practice, current theories of teaching and resourcing and know how it all fits together. You need to know about children's development socially and cognitively.*

Nicola stated also:

> *Good pedagogical knowledge is what you need to know; knowledge of the students in the school, knowledge of the targets within the school, meaning expectations and knowledge of how to get there, good classroom practice, knowledge of knowing where to go for help.*

All the mentor teachers acknowledged the importance of possessing a strong pedagogical knowledge base and, more importantly, being able to discuss and explain their practice to their PRTs while at the same time being critical and reflective.

2. Attitudes

Effective and reflective practitioner
The mentor teachers were in agreement that they needed to have knowledge of their own practice and be able to reflect and improve that practice if necessary. They believed this was an important part of being open and critical. They stated that examples of ways that assisted them in this process of critical reflection were classroom experience and a proven success rate, excellent classroom management skills and being secure in their own practice.

One mentor teacher made the following comment:

> *Mentor teachers need to have been successful, they need to have a proven success rate, it needs to be up-to-date teaching method … They need to be an enquiring teacher really, because they're not going to be a very good mentor teacher if they're not enquiring enough and reflective, they need to have reflective skills and encourage that thinking in an outgoing way.*   (Helen)

Another said:

> *What is important is being open to not only reflecting on your own practice but being open to questioning of your practice whether it's from yourself or your PRT or from someone else … Knowledge of your own practice and being able to reflect on and improve your own skills is what is vital for a mentor teacher and that links into skills as well and maybe dispositions. If you can't reflect to improve on your own practice then how can you help another teacher?*   (Sue)

As articulated by these mentors, to be an effective mentor includes the ability to be a reflective practitioner who focuses on inquiry into his or her own and others' professional practice and learning, based on a clear understanding of excellent teaching. It also includes the ability to demonstrate this excellence in teaching themselves.

3. Skills

Communication

The importance of clear communication skills and the ability to listen without interruption links to the NZTC (2009) Guidelines (6.2) which state that listening to and helping the PRT to solve problems is an essential part of the mentoring process and therefore a skill the mentor should have and be able to utilise effectively. The mentors acknowledged that at times they had lacked communication skills needed for successful mentoring. These comments related mainly to the ability to listen properly during conversations with the PRT but also included the ability to provide honest feedback to the PRT about their teaching practice. All the mentor teachers commented on the importance of having good communication with their PRTs and clear effective listening skills. As two mentor teachers explained:

> *You need to have good communication skills because sometimes you have to give hard messages.*   (Sue)

> *You need very good communication skills, that's probably number one.* (Bev)

There is also the ability of the mentor teacher to know when to give a clear message, as these two mentor teachers noted:

> *I think communication skills are very, very important and being able to read people somehow. Quite often it's not what they say but it's their gestures and things that you get the message through …*   (Julie)

These comments by the mentor teachers indicate there is a need for effective communication skills, such as active listening and asking critical, difficult questions, to be taught to anyone who is to become a mentor. The importance of

establishing relationships that allow for effective communication was iterated by one mentor who claimed, 'We need to know how to create relationships that allow for effective communication, that allow for you to ask those hard question' (Stella). These findings support the NZTC Guideline (6.2) which states the role of the mentor teacher includes listening to and helping the PRT to solve problems.

Supportiveness and understanding
Personal professional qualities such as being supportive, empathetic and approachable rate highly with all the mentor teachers interviewed. This links to the aspect of emotional support which is a very important part of mentoring.

One mentor teacher commented:

> *Mentors need to be someone who can have that open door, that they can come in and have a quick word with you …   (Imogen)*

Sue stated:

> *You need to be professional yet kind, professional yet friendly, professional yet understanding. And being empathetic but not to the point where you let it get in the way.*

Amber said:

> *I always think the best way I can put it in some respects is you need to lead but also need to walk alongside someone in their journey.*

The qualities the mentors referred to included being trustworthy, compassionate, friendly, empathetic and reassuring. A high quality mentoring programme is one which provides a PRT with an experienced mentor who is skilled and resourced with time, training and support and has the ability to give feedback through learning conversations. It also includes the ability of the mentor teacher to use mentoring skills and have the disposition to advocate on behalf of the PRT. The quality of the relationship between mentor teacher and PRT serves to enhance the teaching and learning for both parties and leads to improved student learning outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this paper was to discuss the key findings related to what educative mentors require in their mentoring role with PRTs. The findings were organised into themes: *understandings* – to have extensive curriculum and pedagogical knowledge; *attitudes* – to be an effective and reflective practitioner; and, *skills* – the ability to have a clear communication style and personal qualities of support and understanding. The following discussion will elaborate on what has been summarised in the findings, from the viewpoint of the mentor teachers.
It was indicated in the current research findings that all the mentor teachers thought it was important to have a sound pedagogical knowledge and curriculum base which they were then able to explain and discuss with their PRTs. It was also necessary for the mentor teachers to be able to model and apply this knowledge

effectively in the classroom. The link between strong curriculum knowledge and personal pedagogy (Ball, 2000) is seen as a necessary attribute for PRTs to observe in their mentor teachers. This provides the PRTs with sound foundations for their own thinking in relation to their teaching progress. As He (2009) noted, and was evident in the findings, PRTs need to be guided in their application of 'proper content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and content pedagogical knowledge' (p.273).

Furthermore, part of the process of becoming a fully registered teacher is that PRTs have access to effective and reflective mentor teachers who listen to and help them solve problems (NZTC Guidelines 6.2). Mentors in the current research study appeared to be reflective and clear about the processes involved in building relationships with the PRTs, and the importance of this process. Darling-Hammond (1996) argued that teachers who have this access to teacher networks and enriched professional roles feel more optimistic about the profession. This links to research that states that schools which encourage collaborative practice are more effective in assisting PRTs develop their teaching practice. As Cooper and Stewart (2009) commented, with this collaborative effort there is a provision to create richer learning experiences for all teachers and higher quality educational outcomes for students.

A body of research evidence (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005) relates to the importance of mentors' learning through self-reflection or critical reflection on their own practice. Mulholland and Wallace (2001) noted that the development of a teacher's sense of efficacy has a powerful influence in their induction years. Therefore, these early years of teaching are decisive in the development of a teacher, and having mentor teachers who reflect in a critical and supportive manner with PRTs is essential. Evident also in the research findings was the constructive effect the mentoring and self-reflection had on the mentors themselves in their teaching practice.

Mentors in the research study commented that building a relationship with PRTs, and having a clear communication style with effective listening skills, was the foundation for all their work. In educative mentoring, the learning of the mentors and PRTs occurs through meaningful social communication, interaction and practice (He, 2009). A shift in focus about teachers' professional development has moved the focus away from 'individual effort' to 'communities of learners' where newly qualified PRTs are nourished intellectually by engaging in collaborative practice (Thomas, Wineburg, Grossman, Hyhre, & Woolworth, 1998). This involves being able to communicate ideas with clarity and to acknowledge concerns. This strength-based approach is closely aligned with educative mentoring in which both mentors and mentees are engaged in continued professional growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

The importance of professional discussions and the sharing of ideas were highlighted by the mentor teachers as being vital in their communication with their PRTs. It is clear, then, that communication and interaction of ideas is something which needs to be encouraged, more than just emotional support and practical advice. This practice will assist mentor teachers in helping PRTs in their own learning and the learning of their students.

What this finding means for mentors is that they have to establish a good relationship with the PRT where challenging of ideas and risk taking is encouraged,

therefore the dynamics between the two parties is very important. Bobek (2002) reinforces this, stating that building an effective relationship between mentor and PRT is a significant condition for teachers to remain in the field. Mentors' modelling and interactions with their mentees in a clear communication style are vital for instilling the resilience necessary for teachers to meet the challenges they face in the future (He, 2009). It is about cultivating and creating a professional, open relationship between mentor and PRT which involves collaboration in learning experiences and facilitates personal, professional development. The mentors in the current study indicated the significance of open and clear communication in laying the foundation for a professional, supportive relationship with their PRTs.

An effective educative mentoring programme is part of an interactive working environment where, as research has indicated (Hicks, 1997), PRTs feel more positive about being teachers and more able to meet their students' learning outcomes. Mentors can form close, supportive working relationships with their PRTs, which is a quality the mentor teachers in this study defined as important. These relationships were established on a foundation of respect, trust, understanding and support. As Wynn, Carboni and Patall (2007) concluded in their small scale quantitative study on leadership and working conditions, the first step in raising student achievement is retaining high quality teachers. Effective mentoring is about both retaining PRTs and establishing strong foundations for quality teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Mentors acknowledged that building an excellent working relationship with PRTs was a foundation for their work within the induction process. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) argued that emotional support is one of the strongest learning needs of PRTs. The importance of this was evident in the findings when mentors stated good communication and listening skills were vital in the formation of their relationship with their PRTs. Evidence suggests that establishing that kind of rapport and offering emotional support are typically prerequisites to changing teaching practices (Zachary, 2000). As was evident in the findings, the importance of mentors' modelling and their interactions with their PRTs were vital for instilling the necessary resilience for PRTs to meet challenges in teaching.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Mentoring is an essential part of the growth of PRTs in their first years of teaching. Much of the success of first and second year teacher progress is aligned with quality mentoring experiences that promote positive professional identity, resilience and the belief that their efforts as teachers make a difference (He, 2009). As a result of the current research study it has been argued that in order for educative mentoring to be successful, the following understandings, attitudes and skills are essential to enable successful PRT learning. PRTs need mentor teachers who have excellent qualities in mentoring such as a clear, responsive communication style. Linked with these qualities is the ability for mentor teachers to be effective, reflective practitioners themselves with sound pedagogical and curriculum knowledge which they can model with their PRTs. The challenge, then, for educative mentors is to improve the particular understandings, attitudes and skills required by them. Through in-depth professional development mentor teachers can firstly build on existing expertise and secondly enable educative mentoring to become embedded in their practice.

Within educative mentoring the learning of mentors and PRTs occurs through meaningful social communication and interaction (He, 2009). Educative mentoring allows both mentors and PRTs the chance to have open conversations regarding teaching and learning and a practice that assists in equipping PRTs with the skills and strategies needed to retain them in teaching. The implications and challenges for mentors involved in induction and mentoring programmes is to advance their skills in order to provide PRTs with high quality mentoring experiences.

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