

**Mentoring as a collaborative learning journey
for teachers and student teachers: a critical
constructivist perspective**

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Abstract

The need to improve teachers' professional knowledge and skills is recognised across the globe. However while a neo-liberal model of education puts emphasis on skills and expertise; transformative agendas in education seek to establish educational environments that promote both cultural and social change in a systematic manner. Against this backdrop, educational reforms are initiated globally with the intention of implementing a 'change' process agenda which could conceivably serve alternative if not opposed goals and outcomes. Drawing on a study in a teacher education reform initiative in Scotland, this paper argues that a critical constructivist approach to mentoring can support collaborative learning between teachers and student teachers and in so doing, serve as a model of teacher learning that is grounded in and conscious of the normative structures of classrooms and schools. In this paper, the critical constructivist approach to mentoring is seen as an integrated and egalitarian process encapsulating apprenticeship, reflective, socio-constructivist and participatory strategies to learning. Data collection was carried out using qualitative strategies including semi-structured interview and case studies. A series of examples of practice derived from this empirical study illustrate features of a complex process that incorporates apprenticeship and collaboration based on the critical constructivist approach to mentoring.

Keywords

Mentoring; critical constructivism; teacher and student teacher.

Introduction

The need to improve teachers' professional knowledge and skills is recognised across the globe (O'Meara, 2011). However while a neo-liberal model of education puts emphasis on the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge expertise; transformative agendas in education seek to create educational environments that promote cultural and social change. Against this backdrop, educational reforms driven globally with the intention of implementing 'change' in teacher education could conceivably serve alternative, if not opposed, agendas and goals: an emphasis on the individual characteristics of effective teachers may overlook the influence of the social and emotional dimensions of teacher learning.

This paper stems from research conducted in Scotland reflecting the many global initiative in teacher education reform. Focussed on the restructuring of an undergraduate Bachelor of Education programme, the initiative was built upon the development of a model of collaborative partnership between an Initial Teacher Education Institution and six local authorities. Driven by a parallel development originating in the United States, the Scottish initiative sought to reform curriculum design

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in Initial teacher education to broaden and to deepen curricular content knowledge by including courses from the Arts and Social Sciences Faculties. From a pedagogical point of view however, significant changes were envisaged with respect to teachers' professional learning: from the acquisition of skills for professional performance (Goffman, 1959) to deepening awareness of learning as a life-long process centred upon the development of self and identity within a community. To propel its transformation agenda, mentoring was introduced as a means for supporting professional learning of pre-service and early career teachers. As reported in the literature, supportive environments aid early teachers' professional development (Aderibigbe, 2013; Aspfors and Bondas, 2013; Long, Hall, Conway and Murphy, 2012), and mentoring is gaining more prominence as a support mechanism for teachers at different stages of their career.

Drawing on a small-scale study set within the reform initiative, this paper looks at the role of mentoring in supporting collaborative learning relationships between teachers and student teachers. Arguably, mentoring so conceived can stimulate professional and social change in the workplace.

The concept of mentoring

In the literature, mentoring is mostly conceptualised as a process where experienced and mature teachers assist the novice and early career teachers to learn and develop professional skills (Barrera, Braley and Slate, 2010). This conception is said to be important. Indeed it sits at the heart of established models of professional learning whereby a novice is inducted into the knowledge and practice of the profession by means of a process of apprenticeship. Close observation of the actions of the master and rehearsal of practice are key steps in learning the professional craft. Such a view however has come to be seen as being too restrictive in the 21st century (Shea, 2002) for research indicates that mentors can learn from their mentees (Aderibigbe, 2013), and the distinction between master and novice can be often be blurred depending on context. For example, a younger or more technologically knowledgeable person can provide assistance to a senior or experienced person with limited technological experience (Greengard, 2002 in Larson, 2009). In this situation, age and experience are not important factors as it is the expertise and professional knowledge contributed by all participants that counts most.

Furthermore, current views on mentoring have come to define mentoring in terms of different 'types' of relationships, which are established by people for different purposes. So, as suggested by Lansberg, 1996 (cited in Rhodes, Stokes and Hampton, 2004) different types of mentoring relations can be recognised, such as coaching, facilitating, counselling and networking. A common element across the different modes of mentoring is an emphasis on collaboration between participants (Bradbury, 2010; Shank, 2005), which is orientated towards refining attitude and performance (coaching), enabling action in new contexts (facilitating), supporting emotional and social issues (counselling) and extending collaborative practices (networking). Perhaps, this explains why Cove, McAdam and McGongial (2007) describe mentoring as a voluminous but flexible concept with potential for a variety of applications.

In the context of teacher education, and specifically in this study, mentoring is defined as a collaborative process where both mentors and mentees can engage in professional activities aimed at fostering their personal and professional development (Aderibigbe, 2013). We contend that mentoring so conceived has the potential to widen the range of opportunities for professional learning that are available to both teachers and student teachers and provide quality learning opportunities for school pupils (Aderibigbe, 2013). So, ultimately, mentoring in teacher education becomes a vehicle for growing the ability of all teachers to learn from experience and through engagement with other people.

Critical constructivist approach to mentoring

Having explored different conceptualisations of mentoring, we contend that in the teacher education context, mentoring can be deployed to serve alternative ideas of teachers' professional learning. One view focuses on student teachers as 'visitors' in the professional context; they are novices who need to acquire the skills required for technical implementation of curricular programmes in the classroom (Long, Conway, Hall and Murphy, 2012). Conversely, another view is based on the recognition that students can be active contributors to decision-making about policies and practices affecting the entire school (Harrison and Tony Pell, 2006; Zeichner, 2009). Both views are legitimate and they are often dependent upon the participants involved and the relationships that are being established. From an educational perspective therefore it is important to inquire into the social and professional context of teachers to assess how people forge and maintain relationships. Furthermore, we contend that collaborative mentoring between teachers and student teachers can be supported by means of an egalitarian structure whereby both mentors and mentees can learn from each other (Bradbury, 2010). In this view Kincheloe (2005), argued for the active involvement of teachers and student teachers in the justification of ideas in a collaboratively designed setting. In this sense, professional learning stretches beyond the traditional system where mentees only take direction from mentors without any input, questioning or discussion. Rather, it encourages people to use reflection both in-action and on-action to further enhance the learning experience (Schon, 1983). Zeichner and Ndimande (2008) strengthen this point by adding that while there is a general consensus that teachers are indispensable to the improvement of the quality of a nation's education, the traditional policy perspective sees teachers mainly as 'implementers' of a mandate curriculum. Considerations should thus be given to preparing reflective teachers who can use their own initiative in adapting school curriculum and teaching methods consistently with classroom situations. Hence the authors continue, reflection is not only located at the level of fitting pedagogy within existing expectations, but as suggested by Gray and Colucci-Gray (2010) a form of 'critical reflection' aids the creation of new, personal stances on one's professional practice. A crucial aspect of teacher professional development is that each teacher experiences his/her place of work through their own personal experience. As reported by Heilbronn (2008: 102): "these personal experiences are the ground on which practical judgement builds and is connected to action". Learning to teach is thus a process that continues through the teacher's entire career (Zeichner, 2009).

Looking back at the different modes of mentoring covered earlier, we can thus recognise that mentoring can be crucially deployed to support and steer professional learning across a variety of different orientations. At one end of the spectrum, apprenticeship models are concerned with learning about teaching as a given practice in a particular context; drawing on the experience accumulated in conventional school contexts apprenticeship can lead novice teachers to operate effectively. However, within an egalitarian outlook on professional relationships it is possible to reach out for approaches that stimulate critical and shared reflection on the educational values of teaching. Wilson and Berne (1999, cited by Nokes, et al, 2008) argue that teachers' learning and development could be enhanced through a collaborative culture of sharing ideas and experimentation. This is further supported by Hobson (2002) who explains that Vygotskian theory indicates that human activities such as learning are grounded in social participation and collaboration, not in isolation. This is a commitment for teachers to take responsibility for their own professional development as members of a professional community with a clear social purpose. Indeed reflection and collaboration should not simply relate to perfecting mandate practices but engage openly with the broader political, environmental and social settings in which teachers operate (Zeichner, 2009). Thus in this study, we argue that mentoring is integrated within a broader discussion of the complex set of theorisations of learning to teach, including elements of:

- Socio cultural learning - Learning about and through the values and norms of a particular time and context.
- Apprenticeship - Learning from the practice of a more experienced other.
- Reflection - Learning through self-appraisal and understanding of people's actions in any given context. Reflection can be directed towards the refinement of an existing practice or it can be orientated towards a critical interrogation of roles, values and expected practices (Zeichner, 2009).
- Collaborative learning - Learning through equal participation.

The data presented in this paper will be used to illustrate the critical interface between apprenticeship-based and collaborative models of teacher learning in initial teacher education.

Research Methods

In this study, data collection was guided by hermeneutic phenomenology as our intention was to understand and interpret participants' views on mentoring and actions within the classroom. In the view of Goffman (1959), vital facts can be assessed at the time and place of interaction between individuals, but also beyond the limitations of time. He stresses that real or true attitudes and beliefs of an individual can only be known through his/her statement or behavioural expression. As suggested by Wilson and Hutchinson, 1991 (cited in Laverty, 2003) hermeneutic phenomenology illuminates seemingly trifling facets of life experience that may not be given much attention in relationships, with a view to generating meaning and understanding. Thus, we used qualitative strategies including semi structured interview and case studies to explore assumptions about learning to teach which are embodied and manifested through mentoring practices.

We used the semi-structured interviews as these allow participants to express themselves consistently with their experiences and understanding (Patton, 2002). Also, case studies helped to put this study in a strong position to gather rich information for a better understanding of the development of collaborative mentoring relationships in the classroom. The interviews lasted for about 45 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Two lessons of 40 minutes each were observed in each of the four primary schools involved in the study. The participants were university tutors (n=6), supporter teachers (n=6) and student teachers (n=7). Field notes were used to keep a record of contextual conditions as well as patterns of interaction between teachers and student teachers during the observation (Bryman 2004). In addition, teachers (n=4) and student teachers (n=4) observed in the classroom as part of the case studies were interviewed purposely to clarify interpretations of some of the activities recorded in the field notes. The study complied with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association as necessary approvals were sought and a consent form was gathered from the participants. All names mentioned in this study are pseudonyms.

As for the data analysis, the interview data were thematically analysed while field notes were left in contextual form. In line with Bodgan and Biklen (2003) and Glaser and Strauss (1967), the data were divided into chunks of coherent texts and common views of the participants were coded into themes. We carefully read and discussed the themes following an iterative process to ensure that the data provide insights into the mentoring relationships between supporter teachers and student teachers in this study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Illustrative vignettes

As we earlier explained, the critical constructivist approach to mentoring has the potential to strengthen collaborative learning between teachers and student teachers. However how far is such a model traceable in the ideas and practices supporting teacher professional learning in initial teacher education contexts? The qualitative data presented here illustrate instances and facets of the critical constructivist approach to mentoring in collaborative learning between teachers and student teachers and point to some critical aspects.

Socio-cultural learning

Professional learning is better facilitated when it is contextual and linked to performance in practice. For student teachers such learning would involve knowing about the modus operandi of schools to produce a timely and appropriate professional response. For example, a teacher notes:

‘I would encourage them to look at our policies, timetables, the way that the school works’
(Supporter Teacher 5)

A tutor also reinforces the need for students to have an understanding of the school context and mentoring plays a key role:

‘...involves information about school policies, about ways of working within the school, approaches within the school’
(Tutor 1).

Such transition from being a student to becoming a professional is marked by an ‘emotional’ hit, as explained by one student teacher:

‘At the beginning it was a bit shocking for me and I have to get used to them but now I know their routine and how things work here’
(Case 4, Int. 1).

The stuff of schools, with its routines, times and expectations is far removed from the experiences students are used to, requiring adjustment and orientation. Interestingly, a student teacher also underscores the need for student teachers to understand how to operate within a new context. Key to this however appears to be the relational aspect of sharing a personal and professional space with others:

‘...teaching’s not just about classroom...it’s about knowing how to operate within a school environment, knowing how to behave in the staff room’
(B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 3).

So the data point to the existence of an established view that learning in work contexts is required to strengthen professional knowledge and skills of teachers. Consistent with this, Goffman (1959) highlights the need for skills to be acquired for professional performance. However Vygostkian theory also underscores the importance of learning grounded in social participation (Hobson, 2002). Moreover, networking and coaching as components of mentoring (Rhodes; et al., 2004) can be adopted to foster early teachers’ professional knowledge (Aderibigbe, 2013; Aspfors and Bondas, 2013). For students’ professional learning to be more effective in schools, it follows that they’ll need to be supported by

experienced teachers and school staff. Within the broader frame of support, our data reveals the importance of the 'more experienced other' in inducting a novice into a new professional environment, as can be seen below.

Learning from others (Apprenticeship)

Student teachers feel they could learn a great deal from the experienced teachers through a mentoring relationship. Indeed, they need some information and guidance when in a new professional environment as shown here:

'I suppose that they would kind of give me guidance...'

(B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 2).

'You have to guide them and just giving them general advice or discussing things that they may find difficult'

(Supporter Teacher 6).

A student also confirms that it could be very educative to learn from a more experienced teacher in practice:

'When I'm in a classroom with somebody else, I am able to see what they do, and I can then use that in turn...'

(B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 1).

Additionally, while observing lessons facilitated by student teachers and supporter teachers it was also noted that the idea of learning from a more experienced person is valued as a means for leading an effective lesson:

'The ST introduced the lesson by re-capping what had been done. She also asked the CT what else is needed for the class to be effective'

(Case 1b, Log Data)

'It means demonstrating good practice and helps in supporting them obviously with different teaching styles'

(Supporter Teacher 3).

So mentoring in this case fits in well with more technical ideas of learning to teach. This is also re-echoed by one of the teachers interviewed after observations in the classroom as she noted that it is necessary to advise students about things to look out for:

'Just little things like something to look out for, like one little boy, he doesn't write very much, so I said just to go over to Tom and just give a little bit of extra encouragement'

(Case 3, Int. 2 [CT]).

Consistent with the literature on mentoring, our data show that mentoring involves the process through which experienced teachers can assist the novice teachers to develop their professional knowledge (Barrera, et al., 2010). However, literature also indicates that over reliance on the experienced teachers' views could lead to a situation where student teachers only implement school programmes without

their own inputs. As Zeichner and Ndimande (2008) explained, this is consistent with the traditional perspective of teacher education where teachers are seen as effective when they implement school policies as determined by teachers or school leaders. In a sense, it could be argued that teachers are effective when they understand and uphold schools' values and rules. Since these rules and values cannot be learned in the university but in schools, it is therefore important that student teachers are guided by supporter teachers. That said, we admit that the development of professional skills by student teachers can be hampered when they are seen as effective only when they take instructions without questioning. It is for this reason that we feel that mentoring should be a continuum involving learning from a more experienced person and learning from each other. As we earlier argued, reflection as a component of critical constructivism challenges the apprenticeship approach and we found this in our study as can be seen below.

Reflection

As documented in the interviews, student teachers often referred to opportunities to share views with the supporter teacher to identify opportunities for planning and development of one's own practice:

'She would have time for me to sit down (...) and she would always tell me kind of little positive things about what I was doing and give some constructive feed-back for improvements'

(B.Ed 4 student teacher).

However, when reflection directed on practice was not supported appropriately, the student teacher could experience a breakdown of confidence. He/she could also find it challenging to move onto new stages of professional practice:

'I liked having the class by myself but I would have liked to have maybe more meetings after school that they could just pop in for five, ten minutes to discuss the day and see if there was any questions because I found... at the end I was fine, because I was coping, but in the middle I was still struggling a bit and not sure if what I was doing was right (...) if I am honest there was a few times that I just gave them something a bit easier to mull over instead of getting to know what I should be doing to help them move onto the next step'

(B.Ed 4 Students Teacher 1).

While observing teachers and student teachers in the classroom, it was also noted that reflection stretched beyond the immediate concerns of teaching and was used to bring an element of personal experience in making sense of one's own attitudes and inclinations:

The CT also used reflective style to talk about her experience as a child. As explained, she was once sent to her bedroom by her mum because of an argument

(Case 1b, Log Data).

In another case, the student teacher was reflecting on the class teacher's approach in discharging responsibilities in the class while working together:

In case 3, the children were advised at various points not to be discouraged with their performances as they can improve on that later...The CT kept talking and finding out from the pupils if they think a pupil will do it well. The ST followed suit, reflecting on the teacher's approach. She also prompted a pupil while on the board and the ST did the same

(Case 3b, Log Data).

Reinforcing this sentiment, some participants explain that teachers are to demonstrate good practice upon which student teachers can reflect so as to develop their professional knowledge:

‘It’s allowing the student the chance to think about a course of action and through higher order questioning, will make the decision for himself or herself as to what should happen’

(Tutor 3).

The data highlight the need for reflection to be taken seriously in mentoring between teachers and student teachers as this could enhance learning and teaching (Schon, 1983). As the data reveal, the class teacher used reflection while explaining things to the pupils and the student teacher also reflected on her supporter teacher’s approach in devising ways to facilitate pupils learning. This kind of reflection-in-action has a powerful role in supporting an environment of practical experimentation. Additionally, opportunity to reflect on what was discussed with or learned from supporter teachers so as to be able think and devise essential ideas appears to be necessary. Consistent with this, Zeichner and Ndimande (2008) explained that preparation of teachers as reflective professionals who can adapt and implement policies in relation to classroom situations is important. Not only has the data shown that reflection can strengthen learning between teachers and student teachers, it also indicates that pupils’ learning experience can be enhanced when reflection is used. In a similar fashion, Gray and Colucci-Gray (2010) also underscored the need for critical reflection as it helps with the interpretation of new situations and generation of new knowledge. This aspect however appears more visible when reflection is integrated in contexts of collaboration and equal participation between teachers and student teachers, as evident below.

Equal participation

Our data underscore the importance of collaboration between teachers and student teachers. This viewpoint is highlighted by the following comments:

‘I suppose to listen to my ideas and give his or her views on them’

(B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 4).

‘It’s allowing them to have conversations to think about what they’ve got to teach and how they’re going to teach it’

(Supporter Teacher 2).

A student interviewed after class observation underscored the importance of working collaboratively and mentoring becomes a form of mutual support:

‘Usually we discussed the children's work around the table, at one point I said to Mrs Jason; oh, is it too noisy in the class? And she said; oh, maybe just remind them to keep the noise down, so I reminded them’

(Case 1, Int. 1, [ST]).

A student also explained further that being treated like a colleague was helpful as pupils accorded her some respects as a result of that. In this sense, collaboration appears to change some of the common norms of status and power:

'...as a colleague, not an understudy, so the kids, in that way, knew that I was in charge as well, so it wasn't, like we can misbehave as much as we want because she's a student'
(B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 3).

In our field notes, it is also reported that a teacher worked collaboratively with a student teacher as well as a pupil support assistant.

In case 1, the ST, CT and PSA worked together in coordinating pupils' drama
(Case 1a, Log Data).

Supporting the idea of collaboration between teachers and student teachers, comments were made about the satisfaction of sharing a purpose and learning together:

'We collaboratively planned and that's worked really well'
(Supporter Teacher 5).

'I think it's good to see current thinking, to see new ideas (...). It's mainly curriculum for excellence that she knows so it's quite interesting to see but I think we can probably learn a lot from each other'
(Supporter teacher 2).

In another scenario, we also found that collaboration and equal participation can provide good chances for recovering mistakes and address the potential learning needs of both student teachers and experienced teachers:

The CT said she thought a figure was double but the ST said no, she can't mix it up and the CT said ok, that's true
(Case 3b, Log Data).

This finding confirms the view that teachers' learning and development could be enhanced with a collaborative culture of sharing ideas and experimentation of such ideas (Wilson and Berne, 1999 cited by Nokes, et al., 2008). As the data revealed, learning in mentoring is not restricted to student teachers as experienced teacher may also learn from student teachers through a reverse learning process (Greengard, 2002 in Larson, 2009). Again, learning from each other challenges the traditional model of learning where student teachers just listen to instructions and this can strengthen the professional development of student teachers and supporter teachers. Thus, teachers and student teachers need to be open to learning from others. Further, mentoring as a learning process should provide a platform and opportunities for active engagement of both teachers and student teachers in the creation of professional knowledge and skills (Kincheloe, 2005).

Conclusion

In this study, we adopted critical constructivism as a framework for exploring mentoring relationships in initial teacher education and also as a means for seeking transformation of professional practice through collaborative efforts. We described the critical constructivist approach to mentoring as an integrated and egalitarian process encapsulating socio-cultural, apprenticeship, reflective and participatory strategies to teacher learning. As we explained earlier, the integration of the different orientations to

learning to teach highlights a crucial aspect of teacher professional development: each teacher experiences his/her place of work through one's own personal experience and meaning-making. In the words of Heilbronn (2008: 102) 'these personal experiences are the ground on which practical judgement builds and is connected to action'.

However, we admit that mentoring guided by this theoretical approach is not to be facilitated without its challenges. There may be personal, structural, and cultural challenges to the enactment of mentoring guided by the critical constructivist theory. Strikingly, the deployment of a collaborative approach to mentoring in action appears to be a very promising avenue to introduce opportunities for critical reflection in an environment of shared initiative and trust. As such, we feel that the collaborative culture should translate into a process of collaborative meaning-making that involve all stakeholders including pupils in a process of reflection and joint action. Further, efforts need to be intensified by teacher educators and researchers for more joined-up research on the development of mentoring schemes to support collaborative pedagogical approaches and practice.

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ADERIBIGBE, COLUCCI-GRAY, GRAY: MENTORING AS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING JOURNEY FOR
TEACHERS AND STUDENT TEACHERS: A CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

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