# What mentors do and why relationships matter: Perceptions of effective mentoring practices

Kirsty Wilson, Tracy Whatmore, Nicola Smith, Victoria Saunders, Catherine O'Leary, Beth Marley, Sally Hobday, Sarah Chung and Kalsoom Akhtar
University of Birmingham

## Abstract

In our research project, Mentoring in Initial Teacher Education, we have explored what mentors *actually do* to help student teachers learn to teach. In this paper, we share key literature on mentoring practices that helped us design mentor and student teacher questionnaires to identify which practices were perceived to be most effective. These include mentoring practices 'inside' and 'outside' of teaching. *Inside* practices allow student teachers to learn from mentors whilst they are teaching, for example through live coaching and co-teaching. Practices *outside* of teaching include co-planning and giving feedback. Our analysis of the questionnaire data, together with mentor interviews, revealed that both mentors and student teachers believed that a wide range of practices were effective (to varying degrees). We focus in on three practices: observing experts, co-planning and co-teaching, and giving feedback, and share findings about how mentors optimise the effectiveness of each practice. We identify practice-specific and overarching features, concluding that relationships between mentors and mentees underpin effective decision-making, and enable mentors to adapt their approach to meet the needs of mentees. Our research led us to develop an online mentor toolkit to help mentors develop and refine their repertoire of practices.

## Keywords
Mentoring; initial teacher education; preservice teachers; mentoring practices; relationships; adaptive mentoring.

## Introduction
The importance of mentoring is recognised in current national policy in England, with meeting mentor training requirements a requirement of accreditation (DfE, 2022). The recently updated Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework emphasises 'clear, consistent and effective' mentoring as an entitlement of all student teachers (DfE, 2024, p.7). Mentoring has been identified as *the* most important influence on student teacher learning (Clarke, Triggs and Neilson, 2014). Yet, while research evidence points to the importance of mentoring relationships (Ambrosetti, 2014), there is a limited evidence base on what effective mentoring of beginning teachers actually involves, particularly in relation to specific mentoring practices (Hobson et al., 2009). In our role as teacher educators based in a university in partnership with schools who support student placements, we recognise the wealth of expertise in mentoring, regularly seeing its impact. However, we also recognised gaps in our awareness of what our partnership mentors *actually do* when working with trainees, particularly the practices mentors choose to employ alongside the required meetings and lesson observations.

Our values and approach to working in partnership with mentors is aligned to 'educative mentoring' (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), which is premised on a vision of classrooms as complex sites of enquiry, where student teachers, mentors and university tutors co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning. Maxwell, Hobson and Manning (2022) describe mentoring and coaching that involves joint enquiry as 'collaborative-transformative' but note that 'hierarchical-transmission' mentoring, which

## Citation

reflects traditional expert-novice positioning, is more common in initial teacher education. In our participatory research, we aimed to identify, enhance, and disseminate effective mentoring practice. Our overarching research question was: What do mentors do that helps student teachers to learn? Our sub-questions were:

1. Do mentors and student teachers perceive 'inside' and 'outside' practices to be effective?
2. Are there differences between the perceptions of: primary mentors and primary student teachers; primary mentors and secondary mentors; and experienced mentors and novice mentors?
3. What do mentors do that optimises the effectiveness of specific practices?
4. Are there overarching features of mentoring that enable a range of practices to work well?

**Literature review**
*Approaches to the role of mentor*
The role of the mentor in supporting student teachers is recognised as important and complex, with the need to support mentors recognised at policy level (Mackintosh, 2019). Traditionally, mentors acted as more of an emotional support, focusing on the immediate needs and problems of their mentee (Wexler, 2019). As experienced teachers, mentors were expected to 'transfer' knowledge to their mentee, creating a hierarchical relationship (Hansman, 2002; Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008; Mackintosh, 2019). This approach has been critiqued as over-simplifying the mentoring process and impacting on mentor-mentee relationships (Jones and Brown, 2011; Mackintosh, 2019).

Feiman-Nemser (1998, 2001) distinguishes educative mentoring from the more traditional approach, as '[m]entoring that helps novices learn to teach and develop the skills and dispositions to continue learning in and from their practice' (Feiman-Nemser, 1998, p.66). This approach encourages student teachers to become active participants in their journey (Schwille, 2008), and positions mentors as collaborators who need to 'attend to the beginning teachers' present concerns, questions, and purposes without losing sight of long-term goals for teacher development' (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.18). An educative mentoring approach moves beyond the positioning of mentors as providers of emotional support and resourcing (Schwille, 2008), and supports a more authentic experience for mentees as they tackle teaching situations and reflect upon their experience (Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann, 1987; Ball and Cohen, 1999; Schwille, 2008; Gardiner, 2017; Hughes, 2021). Schwille (2008, p.141) advocates strongly for educative mentoring, noting that it is a 'powerful method,' but to achieve it, mentors need support (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Mackintosh, 2019; Stanulis et al., 2019; Wexler, 2019; Daly et al., 2021).

*Mentoring practices 'inside' and 'outside' of teaching*
Within the mentoring literature, it is acknowledged that mentor-mentee relationships underpin effective mentoring (Ambrosetti, 2014). However, the evidence base on the strategies that effective mentors employ is less well-developed (Hobson et al., 2009). Effective mentoring depends not only on the 'quality' of mentoring and relationships, but also on how it is conducted, and the types of activities used (Ward et al., 2013; Gardiner, 2017; Wexler, 2020). Wexler (2020) notes that there are certain activities that are important, such as purposeful conversations, shared activities, and co-participation in instruction, which reflect a 'collaborative-transformative' approach (Maxwell, Hobson and Manning, 2022).

Schwille (2008) identified a range of practices that mentors employ, distinguishing between practices 'inside' and 'outside' of teaching. Practices *inside* the action of teaching take place during teaching, and include coaching, stepping in, teaching together and demonstration. Practices *outside* the action of teaching take place before or after teaching, for example, demonstration (which can be *inside* or

*outside*), co-planning, mentoring on the move, mentoring sessions, debriefing, video analysis and writing. Schwille (2008) identifies the importance of mentors adapting their practices to suit their individual mentee's immediate and future needs. Thus, mentors need 'bifocal vision' (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Schwille, 2008).

Recent research commissioned by the National Institute of Teaching (NIoT) included a survey of current mentoring practice, which asked mentors, mentees and school leaders what activities they undertake. The survey revealed that practices positioning the mentor as 'expert' dominated (Allen, Ford and Wespeiser, 2022), with modelling, observation and feedback being most frequently employed. The survey focused on the prevalence of practices, while the rapid evidence review also considered effectiveness and impact, concluding that '[t]here is simply a lack of impact evaluation evidence published in the last twenty years on mentoring and coaching programmes for student teachers to enable us to draw conclusions on whether they are effective, or which programme features influence outcomes' (Stevenson *et al.*, 2023, p.76). Like the rapid evidence review, research often focuses on measuring the impact of models of mentoring, but there is clear scope for research on effective mentoring practices, which are an essential part of models of mentoring (Hudson, 2007). Schwille (2008) reinforces this, and states that having a range of mentoring strategies helps mentors support their mentees in both the short and long term.

*Perceptions of the effectiveness of specific mentoring practices*
In considering mentor and mentee perceptions of specific mentoring practices, it is useful to first consider the evidence base for effective mentoring strategies. Research evidence on the effectiveness of lesson observations, demonstration teaching, co-planning, co-teaching and mentor feedback opportunities has informed our own research design and analysis. The practice of a mentee observing their supporting teacher's lessons is described by Schwille (2008) as demonstration teaching. Gan (2014) reports that most student teachers found lesson observation very helpful, and that observation of expert teachers' practice impacts upon student teachers' 'emergent practice and ideals' (Gan, 2014, p.133). Edwards and Townsend (2013) advise that agreeing the focus for observation helps students infer what is happening in a complex classroom setting. This direction of mentees' attention is similarly inherent in Mok and Staub's (2021, p.1) definition of demonstration teaching as 'making cognitive processes explicit and demonstrating teaching-related practices.' Indeed, cognitive modelling was found to be the most 'significant modifier' of practice (Mok and Staub, 2021, p.11). Such demonstration teaching can also occur after a lesson, during a post-lesson reflection meeting (Schwille, 2008). Feiman-Nemser (2001) recollects interview participants' experiences of mentoring through demonstration teaching, noting that it allowed mentees to identify good practice as well as visualise it, thus 'giving living examples of one person's ways of teaching' (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.25).

Co-planning is a collaborative practice, which involves the mentor and mentee working together, allowing the mentee to experience the thought process of a more experienced teacher and supporting the mentee's journey to undertaking their own independent planning (Schwille, 2008; Mackintosh, 2019; Stanulis *et al.*, 2019; Wexler, 2019, 2020). This might involve the mentor and mentee looking through curriculum materials, discussing the intent of the lessons and more administrative aspects, such as timings, behaviour management, and resources (Schwille, 2008; Gardiner, 2017; Stanulis *et al.*, 2019). Both Wexler (2020) and Pylman (2016) highlight the importance of mentors optimising the effectiveness of co-planning by making aspects of planning explicit to their mentee. Equally, when giving feedback on mentees' planning, in line with an educative approach, mentors should be mindful that their advice does not close down professional conversations (Mackintosh, 2019; Wexler, 2020).

Another practice available to mentors is teaching together, or co-teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Schwille, 2008; Mackintosh, 2019; Wexler, 2020). Considered by Schwille (2008) to be a mentoring practice *inside* the action of teaching, and Zugelder (2019) as an aspect of collaborative coaching, Roth and Tobin (2005, p.172) argue that co-teaching allows those involved to develop 'wisdom in practice', but warn that it only works 'where there are no egos involved' (Roth and Tobin, 2005, p.86). Schwille (2008) also suggests that if the mentor has an established presence within the class, it is easier to enact co-teaching as an activity and hence adopt the position of 'co-teacher and co-thinker' (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.26). Like co-teaching, coaching and stepping in, or live coaching, is an *inside* practice, which affords mentees the opportunity to act upon immediate feedback and learn whilst teaching (Moyse, 2018; Marciano *et al.*, 2019). Here, a mentor can help from the sidelines by making subtle suggestions to their mentee, or a little more directly, for example, by asking questions to pupils which can guide the mentee (Schwille, 2008). As with other methods utilised, this practice can be made more or less effective during implementation. Moyse (2018) emphasises the need to establish expectations, such as keeping advice brief and not interrupting. Marciano et al. (2019, p.134) identify the need to reflect on 'in the moment' experiences. A more 'assertive' approach involves the mentor 'stepping in,' which some mentees can feel uncomfortable with, but has potential to support students to 'think on their feet' (Schwille, 2008, p.157).

Scheduled mentoring sessions are commonly part of placement expectations and recognised as effective practice to support students as they reflect on their experiences (Schwille, 2008). Of course, not all interactions with mentees and feedback opportunities are planned. Mentoring on the move (Schwille, 2008) describes mentoring through brief interactions and sharing thoughts and ideas in the moments before and after lessons. Schwille (2008) emphasises that these 'outside' practices need to be focused on developing habits of reflection and self-assessment to be most effective.

Whilst there are several practices available for mentors to employ, there is limited evidence on their efficacy and mentors may feel unprepared for their role (Russell and Russell, 2011; Ambrosetti, Knight and Dekkers, 2014; Clarke, Triggs and Nielsen, 2014; Wexler, 2019). As Wexler (2020) comments, preparing mentors in an educative manner enables them to engage with mentoring practices that support mentees' development. There is also a need for research to explore, not just the type and prevalence of mentoring practices, but also their perceived efficacy by mentors and mentees in both primary and secondary school contexts. In short, a better understanding of what mentors do well will lead to improved mentor preparation.

**Methodology**
*Research design*
Reviewing the existing literature on effective mentoring practices supported the design of our research, which sought to address the question 'What do mentors do that helps student teachers to learn?' We adopted an embedded sequential mixed methods design (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011) to capture the views of mentors and student teachers through questionnaires and interviews.

The initial quantitative element, designed to identify any patterns in perceived effectiveness of mentoring practices, was embedded in the overall qualitative design, in line with the interpretive paradigm. The findings from the quantitative element warranted a shift of focus in our sub-questions, which guided the design of interview questions to explore what makes mentoring practices work well. Thus, the quantitative and qualitative data enabled us to address slightly different sub-questions, and to produce a more complete picture of the domain being studied (Lund, 2012).

*Data collection*
We recruited mentors from our primary and secondary partnership schools, and student teachers

from our primary cohort. All mentors working in partnership schools were invited to participate in the questionnaire and interview; this included those who host student teachers in their classrooms and those whose role is to lead or oversee mentoring. All primary student teachers were invited to participate in the questionnaire. We encouraged the most experienced and expert mentors to be interviewed; such purposive sampling was deemed appropriate given their potential to offer most insight (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011). The research followed the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018), including gaining informed consent, and was approved by our institutional ethics committee (reference ERN_21-1850).

Our data collection included three online questionnaires; one completed by 23 primary mentors in Spring 2022, one completed by 51 primary student teachers in Spring 2022, and the other completed by 21 secondary mentors in Spring 2023, when we chose to extend the research to compare primary with secondary mentors. At this point, we focused our limited capacity on exploring phase-specific differences in mentors' reported practices, though we recognise that questionnaire data from secondary student teachers would have contributed to our understanding. The mentor questionnaires aimed to identify perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring practices and mentor learning. They sought background information and asked respondents to rate on a Likert scale the effectiveness of 16 mentoring practices informed by literature (including Schwille, 2008 as a key source) and our knowledge of partnership practice. The wording of questions was adapted slightly for secondary mentors to reflect slight course differences e.g., primary mentors discuss 'prompts' with student teachers in weekly meetings, while secondary mentors discuss 'thematic tasks'. The student teacher questionnaire focussed on what mentors do to support student teachers learning to teach and student teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these practices. In parallel to the mentor questionnaire, respondents were also asked to rate the effectiveness of the 16 mentoring practices in helping them learn to teach.

We also conducted online semi-structured interviews with eight primary mentors (in Spring 2022, hereafter referred to as Mentors A-H) and two secondary mentors (in Spring 2023, Mentors J-K) from partnership schools. Following initial analysis of the primary mentor questionnaire data, the interview schedule was designed. Interviews were led by a member of the research team and explored individual mentor practices, and what mentors do that optimises their effectiveness. This led to a richer and more detailed understanding of what effective mentoring practice looks like, providing dependable data (Brinkmann, 2018). The interview schedule included questions about what mentors did to help student teachers learn to teach and what had the most positive impact; mentors were also invited to tell stories about how they had helped students who needed extra support. This helped us to develop a more nuanced and situated understanding of effectiveness. Following comparison of primary and secondary mentor questionnaire responses in Spring 2023, we adapted the interview schedule for secondary mentors to probe their use of 'inside' practices, and potential barriers to this.

*Data analysis*
To address our first and second sub-questions, our data analysis of the three questionnaires focused on the perceived effectiveness of the 16 mentoring practices. Key comparisons were explored, including the similarities and differences between mentor and student teacher responses, primary and secondary mentor responses, and more experienced and less experienced mentor responses. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and qualitative data analysis proceeded through three phases. The first phase of analysis was carried out jointly with mentors and involved analysis of transcripts for salient points, identified individually using the highlighter tool and comments. Small groups then compared annotations and wrote pen portraits i.e., condensed descriptions of each mentor (see Wilson *et al.*, forthcoming). In the second phase, one researcher identified key themes in each interview. The third phase, reported on here when addressing the third

sub-question, focused specifically on the practices that mentors used, and involved coding all interviews for pre-identified practices from the literature, and remaining alert to any other practices that could be coded. All extracts of data for each practice were collated and analysed for features of enactment that were perceived to optimise the effectiveness of the practice. This phase involved most of the research team. To ensure consistency, we met as a team to agree on the coding protocol and agreed to resolve dilemmas where practices overlapped by using more than one code. We used peer review to check our analysis of practice-specific features of enactment, ensuring that key ideas were not missed. Using a process of constant comparison (Thomas, 2022) one researcher then analysed the practice-specific features of enactment for overarching themes; this enabled us to address our fourth sub-question.

**Findings**
The findings from the questionnaire and interview data will be explored under the sub-question headings.

*Do mentors and student teachers perceive 'inside' and 'outside' practices to be effective?*
The three questionnaires invited respondents to rate the perceived effectiveness of 16 mentoring practices. These included inside and outside practices (Schwille, 2008) and mixed practices, which (in line with Schwille, 2008) refer to practices that can take place inside or outside teaching or take place during the teaching of an experienced teacher rather than the student teacher. Our key finding across questionnaires was that all practices that participants had experience of were deemed to be effective, to varying extents. This can be seen in Figure 1. (primary mentors), Figure 2. (primary students) and Figure 3. (secondary mentors) below.
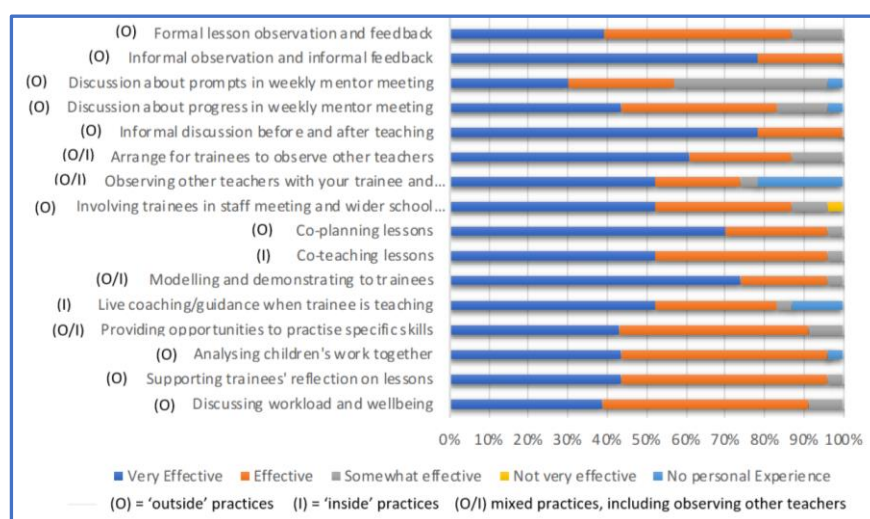


**Figure 1.** Primary mentors' perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring practices.
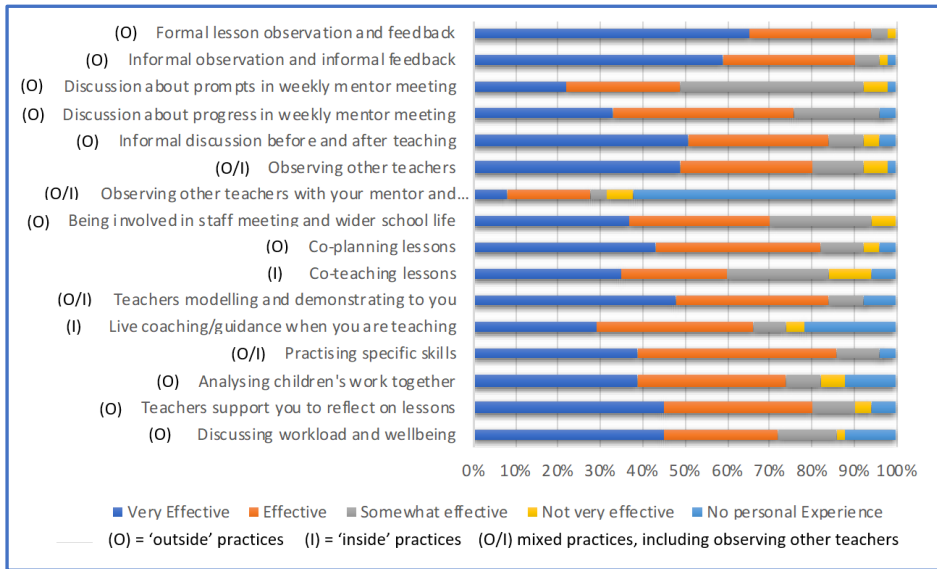
**Figure 2.** Primary students' perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring practices.
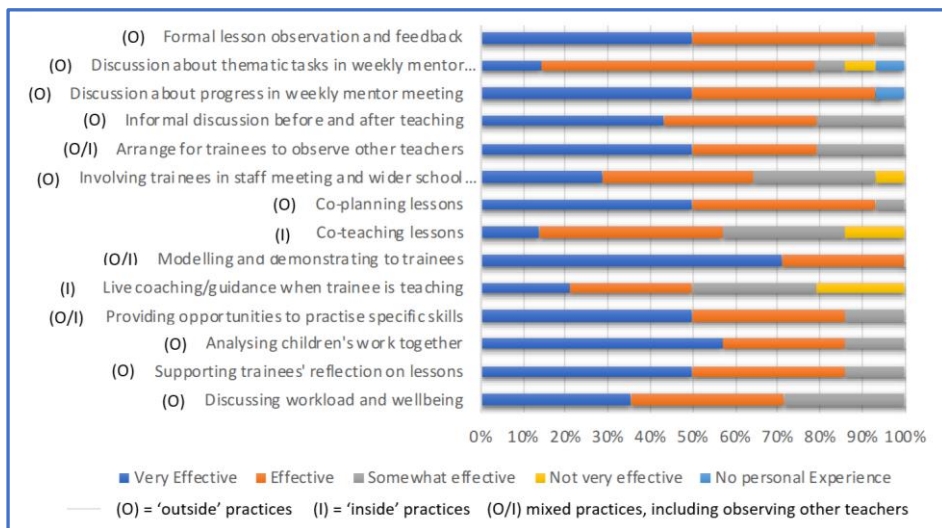


**Figure 3.** Secondary mentors' perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring practices.

Primary and secondary mentors perceived modelling and demonstrating to student teachers and co-planning as very effective strategies, concurring with existing research (Schwille, 2008; Gan, 2014).

*Are there differences between the perceptions of primary mentors and primary student teachers?*
When comparing primary mentors' responses (Figure 1) with primary student teachers' responses (Figure 2.), there is considerable overlap, with most mentors and student teachers rating all practices as very effective or effective.  A minority of students rated most practices as not very effective, which may reflect their own challenges in learning to teach.  Primary mentors placed greater value on informal approaches, while primary student teachers perceived formal lesson observation and feedback as more effective. This suggests that student teachers prefer more structured and explicit guidance and assessment. However, the other top four rated practices of primary student teachers align with what primary mentors perceived as most effective.

*Are there differences between the perceptions of primary mentors and secondary mentors?*
When comparing the questionnaire responses between primary mentors (Figure 1.) and secondary mentors (Figure 3.), there is also overlap, with most mentors from both phases rating practices as very effective or effective. However, practices *inside* the action of teaching of live coaching and co-teaching were identified as more effective by primary mentors than secondary mentors. This may reflect the close relationship that primary student teachers have with their mentors, whereas secondary student teachers typically work with several teachers.

*Are there differences between the perceptions of experienced mentors and novice mentors?*
The data analysis also considered mentors' experience and responses to open questions, allowing for a more nuanced examination of the perceived effectiveness of different mentoring approaches. Experienced mentors prioritised induction into the school ethos, along with informal discussions, practising specific skills and reflection (in line with Schwille, 2008 and Feiman-Nemser, 2001). They also stressed the importance of modelling teaching and practising, reflecting that this provides student teachers with tangible exemplification. In contrast, less experienced mentors focused on providing emotional support and encouragement, alongside sharing their own observation and feedback experiences, which they believed helped foster a supportive environment (in line with Schwille, 2008). We explored the perceptions of experienced mentors in more depth in our interviews.

*What do mentors do that optimises the effectiveness of specific practices?*
In our analysis of the mentor interviews, we sought to understand more about how and why practices were perceived to be effective. Two interview questions proved particularly insightful; one asking what mentors do that impacts on student teachers' learning, and a second question asking how they had helped a student teacher who had struggled. We collated all the data on each practice and identified the features of enactment that mentors perceived as optimising its effectiveness. Here, we share our findings for three practices of different kinds with rich explanatory data, identifying *what makes it work well*.

*Observing other teachers*
Four key points emerged around optimising student observations of other teachers: expert modelling and thinking aloud, linking observations with targets, having a specific focus for observations, and observing with an expert.

Mentors felt it was vital that students had opportunities to see expert modelling of good practice, with mentors modelling what they expected of mentees. This was defined by Mentor G as 'practising what you preach' and recognised by Mentor J, who felt mentors should be 'the role model that you expect'. Mentors talked about the value of demonstrating specific aspects of teaching, for example, Mentor K modelled phrases and strategies they wanted the student teacher to subsequently implement. Modelling was equated with 'holding students' hands' early on to help them become more expert in specific pedagogical practices, then fading scaffolding as the student became more proficient. Mentor E recognised 'thinking aloud' as a valuable scaffold to make decision-making behind expert practice visible:

> If we're asking them to try out lots of new ideas and taking risks, then you know you need to be doing it yourself and then talking through but still being reflective yourself out loud with your trainee when they're observing you and then encouraging them to do the same.

This dialogic scaffolding echoes Marciano et al. (2019) and Jump (2021), who found it essential that both mentors and mentees reflect on their practice.

Linking the focus of expert observations with targets for the mentee's own practice was believed to accelerate progress. Mentor C felt giving a target of something that had been observed "works as an opportunity for the student teacher to practise it, but also for me to assess how much of it they've taken on board". Students moved from knowledge of a practice, observing it in lessons, to enacting it themselves. Mentors also pointed to the value of linking observations to the specific expertise and approaches of other teachers. Mentor K suggested observing:

> Colleagues within the school who might have a particular area of subject knowledge ... and if the student teacher is lacking in a particular area … you want to go and observe this teacher because they're really good at this or they know a lot about this.

Several mentors identified the value of observing teachers with varied approaches, for example in behaviour management, to expose mentees to different ways of teaching. They also recommended students observe teachers whose temperament or disposition was like their own, like the mentor in Feiman-Nemser's (2001) study, who identified demonstration teaching as providing living examples of one teacher's manner of teaching. Mentor K agreed that students could take different things from different teachers, "like magpies … until they kind of feel comfortable in their own way."

In line with Edwards and Townsend (2013), mentors recognised the value of having a specific focus for observations, with prompts or questions helping students' noticing. Post-lesson discussions between mentor and mentee can help students make sense of what they have observed, and team teaching was advised for further practising of an observed approach. Observing other teachers alongside the mentor, where the mentor narrated their thinking, deconstructing the lesson with the student as they 'thought aloud' the reasons for the choices and practices being demonstrated, was a practice seen as particularly effective.

*Co-planning and co-teaching*
Co-planning and co-teaching often work together in practice.  Underpinning their most effective enactment are strong, positive relationships involving good communication, mentors and mentees feeling comfortable with each other and trusting each other.

All mentors valued spending time sitting with a student teacher to co-plan, although co-planning can look different at different stages. For co-planning to work well, mentors identified the need for strong scaffolding to begin with, helping the student structure their planning, then fading scaffolding to shift ownership and responsibility to the student. Mentor A emphasised, 'You scaffold it early on and then model a bit with them and then hopefully as they become more confident you start to encourage them to do it independently'. As Mentor E said, 'it is then an opportunity to offer challenge to the student teachers and get them to focus on specific things whilst being supportive'.

Mentors shared the importance of 'guided practice' where mentors share initial ideas and examples of what they 'may do' and questions they 'may ask' in the lesson. They then gave the student teacher the opportunity to add more detail and their own ideas independently before agreeing a final plan. Mentors highlighted that student teachers often need support with using existing planning, believing they can deliver a scheme of work and ready-made worksheet. Scaffolding through dialogue can help students understand how to adapt pre-prepared planning to meet the needs of the class. Mentors cited the importance of 'thinking aloud and talking ideas through' to make teachers' thinking processes visible, which resonates with Schwille (2008).

Mentors recognised that co-planning and co-teaching are not easy, but that when they are 'working well', they enjoy it. As Mentor E said, 'you can bounce ideas off each other and build on someone else's strengths'. The mentors agreed that student teachers bring new up-to-date ideas, and some

said it had helped to further develop their own teaching in line with educative mentoring (Marciano et al., 2019). Communication and trust were also perceived as vital for effective co-teaching, and it was considered important to negotiate and have a plan to encourage turn-taking and make opportunities for the student teacher. Mentors were aware that it is easy for class teachers to keep 'jumping in' and 'taking over' but they should let students have a go, knowing which part of the lesson they will teach.

*Feedback*
There was consensus amongst the mentors that specific features of effective feedback are sensitive verbal feedback, strong relationships, a cyclical approach, realistic and achievable targets and timely feedback.

Mentors identified the need for sensitive verbal feedback, and using purposeful conversations (Wexler, 2020) to support the development of mentees' teaching skills, understanding and confidence. Mentors valued the role of dialogue *outside* of teaching but also *inside* of teaching (Schwille, 2008) through live coaching. Mentors highlighted the need to step into a mentee's lesson when their teaching is not going well. This is not a case of mentors not looking for, or ignoring, the positive aspects of their mentees' teaching, but showing concern for mentee wellbeing and confidence. Several mentors discussed how a supportive mentor-mentee relationship underpins effective feedback 'in the moment'. Mentors recognised the possible negative impact of giving feedback during a lesson and need for sensitivity in how and when to give feedback, highlighting the importance of tailoring practices to the needs and dispositions of their mentees. However, there was less consideration of setting expectations for mentoring in the moment, as advocated by Moyse (2018) and Marciano et al. (2019). It could be that clear expectations are seen as part of effective mentoring relationships and something that mentors 'take for granted,' or that mentors are unprepared for the role (Ambrosetti, Knight and Dekkers, 2014; Clarke, Triggs and Nielson, 2014).

All mentors talked about the significance of relationships with mentees. Mentor C highlighted the importance of using humour; Mentors D and H talked about how a positive relationship can maximise the chances of feedback being well received and acted upon. Several mentors discussed the cyclical nature of feedback and the value of revisiting areas of development over time. Mentor A talked about "picking up on the things that I've picked up last time" when observing a student teaching. It is evident that mentors adapt their approach in response to the individual student and their development.

Mentors thought about their mentees' development holistically, demonstrating sensitivity to wellbeing, so where and when feedback is delivered is important, as well as how. There are references within the data to timely feedback and not wanting students to be left waiting or having to 'second guess' what their mentor will say.

Overall, we have found that effective feedback involves expertise in relation to specific features of delivering the feedback. However, this needs to happen in the context of a positive mentor-mentee relationship, which demonstrates sensitivity to the needs of the individual student as a novice teacher. The data also suggests that mentors rely heavily on their knowledge of their individual student and what might support them.

*Are there overarching features of mentoring that enable a range of practices to work well?*
Our research has highlighted several aspects of effective mentoring practice. Mentors and student teachers agreed that a diverse range of 'inside' and 'outside' practices were being used, and that all of these were effective (to varying degrees). Given this, we shifted our focus to exploring how to make practices work well. In this paper, we have shared our findings about optimising the effectiveness of

three specific practices: observing other teachers, co-planning and co-teaching, and giving feedback. In our wider analysis, we identified the key features of effective mentoring practices that were present across and beyond these three practices. The overarching feature was relationships, which was perceived to underpin mentors' enactment of a range of practices in relation to building confidence and teaching expertise. Mentors adapted their mentoring based on their knowledge of the needs and temperaments of individual student teachers.

*Relationships*
The significance of the mentor-mentee relationship cannot be underestimated. Our mentors identified that the relationship optimises the effectiveness of practices by attuning mentors to the emotional needs of their mentee, but also the needs of their mentee as a learner. Ambrosetti, Knight and Dekkers (2014) also recognise the importance of relationships, which are positioned at the heart of their mentoring framework. They describe the value of a 'reciprocal relationship whereby the mentor and mentee each have skills, knowledge and practices to share' and the need for 'nurture, support, mutuality, and trust,' with mentors undertaking roles of 'advocate, friend, colleague and counsellor' (Ambrosetti, Knight and Dekkers, 2014, p.225).

Mentors generally favoured a dialogic and educative approach to mentoring (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), rather than seeing themselves as experts transmitting knowledge. As Mentor C said, 'if a student teacher feels like their teacher judgement is respected and their independence is respected and their autonomy is respected, then I feel like they can then do the best'. The approach is pertinent to optimising practices *inside* the action of teaching, such as co-teaching and live coaching, where a strong mentor-mentee relationships can inspire mentees' confidence to take risks and to learn 'in the moment' without feeling undermined. This is nicely captured in the words of a primary mentor, discussing how to optimise live coaching:

> If you see me stand up, that means, you're taking too long … have little cues … there will be times you do have to jump in, but it's having that relationship with the student teacher where they're not overwhelmed … building that confidence
>
> (Mentor H).

*Adapting mentoring practice*
Strong relationships afford mentors a deeper understanding of the needs and temperaments of their mentees, which enables them to adapt and personalise their mentoring practices according to individual student teacher needs, characteristics, and motivation (identified by Hobson *et al.*, 2009 as important):

> I've been a different type of mentor with different people … if you're a mentor, you can't just be one type of mentor, you've got to adapt yourself for whoever you are working with
>
> (Mentor E).

> I don't think a one size fits all approach is what works … you're dealing with people who've got very personalised experiences … if you don't respond to that, you're not going to address the key issues that are the right priorities for them
>
> (Mentor F).

Identifying 'the right priorities' enables mentors to tailor their approach to select and adapt practices to 'address the key issues.' For some student teachers, this meant providing more emotional support, and for others, this meant a higher level of specificity. This approach exemplifies Schwille's (2008, p.155) conclusion that 'Rather than simply choosing a form of mentoring from a list, mentors must

learn to improvise to suit the situation and the novice's learning.' To do this effectively, mentors need to utilise their mentoring repertoire flexibly to meet their mentee's immediate and future needs i.e., having bifocal vision (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Schwille, 2008).

In summary, the mentoring practices work most effectively together; they support each other, and are part of a holistic but systematic process, which is personalised to the student teacher and school context and underpinned by relationships. This helps student teachers make appropriate proximal progress, learn about the complexities of teaching, and have the knowledge, understanding and skills to rise to the challenges of professional practice.

**Conclusion**

*Implications for our partnership*

Our embedded sequential mixed methods design enabled us to address our central research question through evolving phases of data collection and analysis that advanced our understanding of what mentors *actually do* in our partnership schools.  We have used our findings to develop an online mentor toolkit, which provides support and guidance for mentors to extend their mentoring repertoire. The mentor toolkit is a valuable resource for new and experienced mentors, offering guidance on optimising the effectiveness of practices.  We have specifically targeted some content; for example, we have encouraged secondary mentors to engage with materials on live coaching and co-teaching.  Our research has also shaped our recent design of mentor training materials, in line with national requirements (DfE, 2022).  Reflecting our partnership values and our findings on the significance of *relationships* and *adaptive mentoring*, we have included materials on educative mentoring and emphasised the importance of relationships in supporting student teachers' cognitive and affective needs within the socio-cultural context.  We value our mentors' professional judgement on how to adapt practice, and our training materials illustrate this with examples and guidance in using the toolkit to support mentors in choosing the 'right tool for the job'.  We hope that the toolkit and training, which includes co-constructed research evidence, will strengthen mentors' decision-making beyond using their experience and instinct.  We are encouraged by feedback to date, which has been overwhelmingly positive.

*Wider significance*

Whilst our research is small-scale, focused on our own partnership and lacking in qualitative data from student teachers, we believe it has wider significance for mentor preparation and professional learning in the current policy-driven context (DfE, 2022).  In line with educative mentoring, our findings contribute to a growing evidence base that identifies mentoring, like teaching, as a professional and complex endeavour (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Schwille, 2008).  Schools are complex relational environments that shape professional learning (Daly, Milton and Langdon, 2020) and our findings about the overarching importance of relationships and adapting practice contribute to literature that highlights the challenges in identifying 'what works' (Cain, 2009) and hence challenges in designing training materials.  Indeed, Murtagh *et al*. (2024) recently report on how mentors of Early Career Teachers (ECTs) tasked with using mandated training materials navigated their role by drawing on their own experiences and context.

Whilst our findings go some way towards advising mentors how to enact practices effectively, the importance of underpinning relationships and adaptive practice suggests that mentor preparation and ongoing professional learning needs a strong and intentional focus on mentees. In contrast to conceptions of teachers as craft workers or technicians, Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2015) refer to a 'research-based textured notion of professional judgement' (p.202). We argue that effective mentors, like teachers, use their professional judgement to adapt their practice, and hence centralised agencies and those designing mentor preparation should acknowledge mentors' adaptive expertise. Rather

than a formulaic or technical approach, capturing and sharing mentoring experience supports the development of mentor expertise, described as a 'nuanced dance in which mentors and mentees are both learners' (Langdon, 2017, p.541). As a next step, we are currently researching the social learning experiences (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020) of mentor-mentee pairs as they participate in the 'nuanced dance'.

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