A case study evaluating the experience of a tutor co-teaching with students on a teacher education placement

Adrian Copping

University of Cumbria

adrian.copping@cumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

In the UK, teacher education often includes more formal sessions facilitated by a university-based tutor and placement-based learning supported by a school-based mentor. Recent English government policy seeks the expansion of school-led teacher education. This suggests a shift in emphasis from current practice. The relationship between centre and placement-based provision therefore comes into focus. Through the implementation of a 'co-teaching model' and an interpretive theoretical perspective, this study seeks to explore how the practice of co-teaching supports students to make links between university and placement-based learning and how it can support continuing professional development for university and placement-based colleagues. The study also considers what preparation needs to take place in order for co-teaching to be successful. A critical review of literature provided a framework for conceptualising 'co-teaching'. Drawing on Parsloe and Leedham's (2009) coaching model and Neubert and Bratton's (1987) mentoring model, a cyclical model of 'co-teaching' was developed. The model was evaluated through my intervention as a member of a student team on a week's school placement. Data was collected through a reflective diary, questionnaires and focus group discussion with school-based staff, the student team and questionnaires from the whole student group. Findings extrapolated from the research through analysis of experiences demonstrated that all involved in the process needed to have a shared understanding of co-teaching. Also, it was important for the tutor and students to have a shared experience where the relationship between the tutor and students was one of openness.

Keywords

Placement-based, mentoring, co-teaching, integration, teacher education

Introduction

In England a typical model sees a university initial teacher education provider (that I am calling a **centre-based provider**), shaping programmes which embed placements that scaffold and support the student journey. However, national policy has more

recently called for a model of teacher education that allows for the expansion of school-led training. The intent is for new teaching schools to play more of a central role in training teachers. Sundli (2007) suggests that in teacher education more focus is being placed on a 'situated learning' perspective. She draws on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who emphasise the importance of learning as a process of participation in communities of practice. What role then will centre-based providers play?

This study advocates and then evaluates a model of mentoring where a university-based tutor works as a co-teacher alongside student teachers on a placement. It explores how this model can develop students' learning as well as support continuing professional development for university-based and placement-based providers. The study investigated the experiences of four primary postgraduate student teachers co-teaching with their personal tutor during a creative themed week placement as part of a module of study. The data was collected over a three-month period from initial planning through to teaching and evaluation using questionnaires, reflective diary, focus groups and participant observation.

Mentoring and co-teaching in teacher education

This literature review explores mentoring and the concept of co-teaching that arises out of mentoring literature. Mentoring is usually associated with placement-based learning, and while structures for mentoring are often outlined in materials given to the placement base by the centre-based provider, practice is varied. This practice often sits outside of centre-based programmes and can lead to a disjointed learning experience for students.

The process of mentoring is complex. Mentoring can often be a process done **to** the student rather than **with** them with the sole purpose being supporting them to master work-based situations. From her research in Norway, Sundli (2007) discovered that student teachers desire to master situations by becoming clones of the mentor. Her work suggests that the creating and defining of a professional identity is one of the biggest hurdles to jump in attaining success in the classroom and by cloning a mentor in terms of vocabulary, expressions, gestures and body language, this hurdle can be jumped. Edwards (1997:13) states that:

> 'Part of the problem in England is that the focus is not on the education of the educators but on the training of curriculum deliverers.'

This implies that mentoring here is a function, much like Hamilton's (1993) industry definition, where an experienced employee or manager supports a novice member of the workplace rather than Pask and Joy's (2007) holistic approach where the term mentor is used to support personal as well as professional development. Brockbank and McGill (2009) would recognise this as a 'functional' approach, echoed by Darwin (2000) who refers to it as an 'old-fashioned' approach. However this model does allow for the evaluation and measurement of success. Here we see an outcomes-based approach to mentoring, where the purpose of the mentoring relationship is to achieve something and to move from, for example, a position of non-understanding

to one of understanding. However, Megginson and Garvey (2004:12) offer a critique of this approach:

> *'It is effective in getting us to where we want to go but it cannot develop our awareness of the different sorts of destination available.'*

Definitions of 'mentoring' are varied and often contested. In contrast with an outcomes-based approach. Fletcher (2000:8) suggests that mentoring is about supervision and means:

> *'…guiding and supporting the trainee to ease through difficult transitions.'*

Within the literature, one thing is clear, mentoring is centred on relationship. Lave and Wenger (1991) state that in mentoring, the focus is on the relationship between mentor and mentee. Maynard (2000) takes this further. She has studied relationships in initial teacher education and suggests that perceptions of good mentoring are where the relationship between the placement-based mentor and the student teacher is strong in terms of welcome and acceptance. This is taken further into the realms of learning by Pask and Joy (2007:8) who suggest that a mentor should facilitate thinking things through. The things they suggest include the mentee's role, moral purpose, situation and issues they face. Connor and Pokora (2007) take the notion of learning relationships and unpack it in more detail. They argue that the learning relationship is central to both mentoring and coaching with the role of facilitating insight, learning and change. This echoes Pask's definition while adding the idea that the purpose of mentoring and coaching is to effect change.

However, implicit in all the definitions above is an apprenticeship model; that of an experienced mentor, teaching, supporting and facilitating the learning and development of an apprentice. While there is undoubted benefit for the apprentice (student) and it could be argued there are professional benefits for the mentor in terms of articulating their pedagogical approaches. While recognising that learning for all parties cannot fully occur where a tutor is teaching with students, the intention is that co-teaching will facilitate co-learning.

My own approach draws on the work of Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox and Wassell (2008). They use the term 'co-teaching'. This term, as I interpret it, is intended to bring together principles and practice from mentoring but look at the mutual learning benefits to both mentor and student. The full benefits of learning through mentoring cannot fully be achieved when the mentoring relationship is between a perceived expert and a perceived novice. However, a way to moving towards this is by recognising mutual benefits of the relationship. Simpson, Hastings and Hill (2007) suggest that the relationship can provide opportunities for school-based colleagues within placement providers to reflect on their own practice and share experiences as professionals. Barnett (1992) suggests that involvement in initial teacher education can lead to practising teachers taking their own education further through continuing professional development (CPD), and thus strengthen links between placement and centre-based providers. A model where the tutor and student can

both learn is explored by Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox and Wassell. They undertook a study using co-teaching and co-generative dialogues which they state are:

> *'…strategies that can promote learning communities based on collective teaching, respect and responsibility within classrooms.'* (2008:968)

Their study involved placing several student teachers in one school. The co-teaching, where successful, produced a learning community among school-based colleagues where discussion around pedagogy was more prevalent. This approach was a success for the student teachers because by working with a variety of teachers they engaged with a wider variety of teaching styles and experience. Through co-generative dialogue with student teachers, learning orientated discussion was facilitated resulting in professional development for placement-based colleagues.

This study also stated that co-teaching is successful when all participants understand the model's objectives and respect each other as colleagues. Carroll, McAdam and McCullogh (2012) support this by emphasising the recognition of development that comes with respect. They advocate the importance of professional conversation for both mentor and mentee. Pask and Joy (2007) suggest that the mentor relationship is not just about professional development but also about a person. They suggest that the conditions of success are when the person is attended to, not just their skill/concept development. Others recognise that the relationship is as beneficial for the mentor as for the mentee. The process is not just about developing a mentee's skills, concepts and understandings but also those of the mentor. Schmidt's (2008) study recognises that mentors learn from their mentees but takes the notion further and suggests that successful mentoring occurs when the mentor is not deemed an 'expert'. Schmidt's work takes a novice music teacher (Jelani) and his work with student teachers. Schmidt reports that:

> *'…the opportunity to function in a well-supported mentoring role for other beginners helped Jelani to articulate and reinforce his growing pedagogical knowledge and skills.'* (2008:646).

Schmidt's study does not necessarily advocate the use of novice teachers to mentor student teachers but it does suggest potential benefits of this approach.

Traditional approaches to mentoring can be limited by a number of factors. The purpose is often about an outcome, where success is measured by an increase in skill level to perform a process in a context. The roles are often defined as 'expert' and' novice', which can make the 'novice' feel passive in the process and the 'expert' needing to learn nothing. Alternatively, a 'co-teaching' approach emphasises the process and learning journey where the mentor walks alongside the students, guiding and supporting through shared experience, offering support and advice and ensuring the students are active in the learning journey. This approach emphasises the importance of a trust relationship, collaborative, two-way learning where the focus is not just on the development of skills, knowledge and understanding but also on the person.

The context of the above discussion, research and model has been co-teaching between school-based colleagues and student teachers. Could the model be applied to student teachers and centre-based colleagues? Existing models of mentoring are predominantly linear and do not fully demonstrate an appreciation of the quality of relationships between mentor and mentee.

As a result of reading, I have adapted these models to firstly reflect the cyclical process that mentoring is and also to reflect the tutor's (co-teacher's) learning that can be attained through the mentoring process. The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the implementation of the model on a small scale and to respond to the question: How can a co-teaching approach to mentoring benefit the co-teacher and students?

Figure 1: A cyclical process model of co-teaching adapted from Parsloe and Leedham's (2009) coaching model and Neubert and Bratton's (1987) mentoring model.
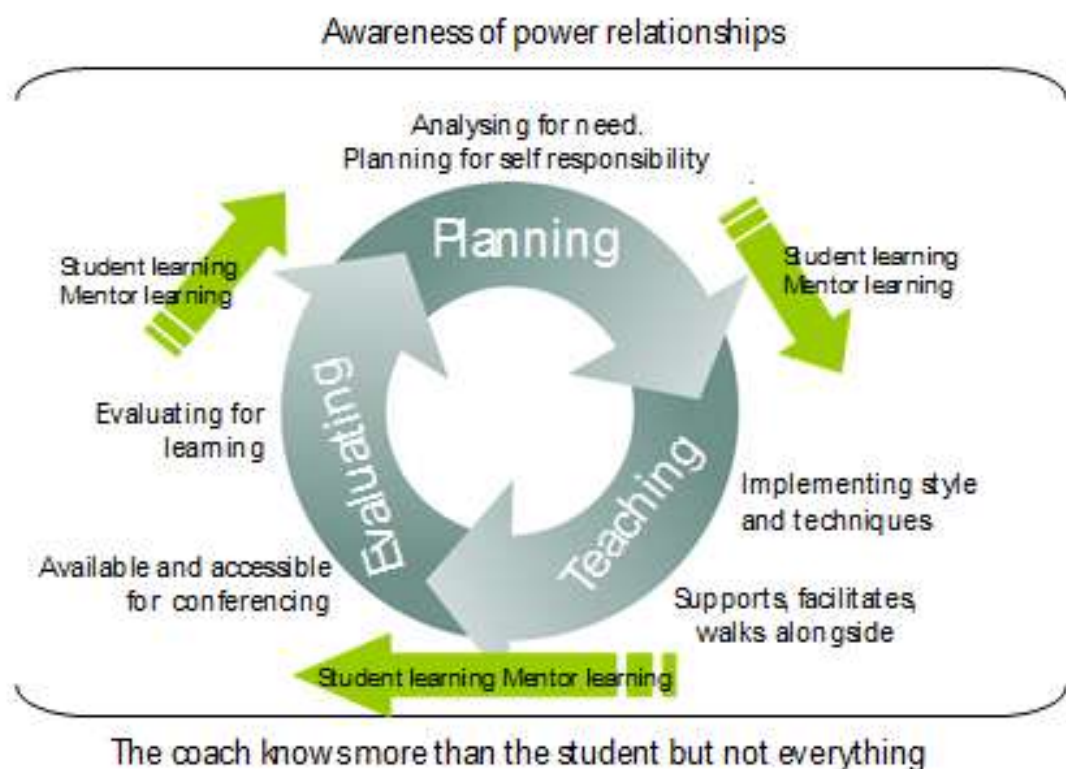
Methodology

The findings presented in this paper arise from a case study approach. This approach was used in order to probe deeply and focus in depth within a particular context (Cohen and Manion, 1994) The study is also ethnographic in its approach through the use of detailed observations recorded through a reflective diary. Yin (2003) in Taber (2007) states that case studies approach is context-based rather than isolating the case from its context. The context of the class and year group is of importance to

the study as participant observation was also employed. Through co-teaching with the students, non-verbal behaviour, relationships in a more natural and neutral environment could be observed (Cohen and Manion, 1994).

This small-scale study took place with four PgCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) primary student teachers, alongside me (centre-based tutor) and three school-based colleagues. The study took place over a number of months during a module 'The Creative and Effective Curriculum' which I taught to a group of students (including the four student teacher participants). Central to the module is a one-week, themed placement where the tutor group (26 students) work in a school to plan and teach a themed week of work. The study took place in the seventh month of a ten-month course in a large urban, predominantly white, socio-economically mixed primary school. In order to achieve as much mutuality as possible I worked with four strong student teachers in a year group of which I had limited experience.

In relation to the ethical issues raised by the study, all school-based staff members were introduced to the research proposal so those who took part did so from an informed, transparent position. The students approached were also generous in granting informed consent to use questionnaire and focus group data, with the opportunity to withdraw themselves and their data at any point. As a result I placed myself in a team in a Year 1 (5–6 year olds) class. Leading up to the placement I involved myself in planning meetings with the student teachers, visit days to the school and preparation of resources. The 'cyclical process model' (Figure 1.) was followed through the planning, teaching and evaluation stages of the project and I kept a reflective diary through which I recorded observations, thoughts and reflections on the processes and outcomes. I was also able to keep a note of school-based colleagues' responses to me.

Questionnaires given to the whole student group and all school staff were used to gain an overview of their thoughts about the benefits and opportunities presented by my co-teaching. During the week of teaching I convened a focus group for the three school-based colleagues involved to gain their perspective on the process. The questions used were based on my observations and reflective notes throughout the week. The following week a similar focus group was convened with the student teachers. The focus was on learning, development and linking placement-based learning with university-based learning.

Focus group recordings were transcribed and the reflective diary that I kept provided qualitative data to evaluate the effectiveness of the model. The data was analysed using a thematic approach and a constant comparative method. This method allowed for a continuous refining of categories and the ongoing discovery of relationships between units of data (Geortze and LeCompte, 1981, in Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Using this method, open coding (to disaggregate the data) followed by axial coding (to recognise relationships between categories) were employed to categorise the data as it emerged through my transcription of the recordings. Gray (2004) encourages the researcher to transcribe their own recordings as it supports immersion into the data at an early stage.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the evaluation of the model:

- Shared understanding

- Co-teacher comfort zone

- Mutual trust relationship

Shared understanding

Both student teachers and school-based colleagues lacked a shared understanding of the purpose of co-teaching and the role that the co-teacher would play.

It was clear through the research that there was not a shared understanding of my role as 'co-teacher'. School-based colleagues had a particular view of my role as a tutor and, as a result, the role I would play. The view given, I would conceptualise as an authority figure, backing the school up if they tried to tell the students anything.

One school-based colleague stated:

> *KG …but to have you from college just to back up everything that's going on… I do think it's important you've been here. The students see you here, we know you're here, it's a partnership then isn't it?'* (placement-based colleague, focus group 1)

The model asks for an awareness of power relationships. The school was placing me in a position of power through their understanding of what my role was. One student commented:

> *PR …the staff saw you as a tutor… So they would talk to you as a tutor rather than doing it as a four…* (student, focus group 2)

Counter to this, the students were also putting me in a position of power over the school, not in a policing way but as an advocate. Data from the students' questionnaires and focus group made clear that if questioned about the approaches they had chosen to take, then the students could ask me to be an advocate on their behalf with the school and add legitimacy to the activities, teaching methods and planning that they were doing. The findings then showed that both the students' and school-based colleagues' views of the tutor's role was to support them and add some legitimacy to their argument at a point of conflict. Data gathered from student questionnaires supported this with 18 out of 24 respondents seeing the benefit of a tutor being in school as one of a mediator or problem solver. While four responses indicated the benefits of a tutor observing teaching, none entertained the idea that there might be benefit to a tutor teaching with students in terms of mutual learning and experience. Therefore a lack of shared understanding of the role was evident and this may have undermined the purpose of this approach because a more traditional understanding of the mentor role.

Co-teacher comfort zone

The co-teacher and students had a shared experience where the co-teacher would be out of his/her comfort zone.

Throughout the planning, teaching and evaluation process it was clear that my sharing the students' experience was an important factor for success. As a practising teacher, my experience was largely working with children aged 8–11. There was then a great deal of significance to placing myself with a team of students working with a class of 5–6 year olds. Focus group discussion supported this:

> AC …I just throw this out to you, do you think it helped, I mean it may have been a different dynamic if I'd been in Year 4,5,6… whereas in Year 1 I'm not the expert.

> DL …It's made it more human. You've been more human, you're not sure what you're doing, so they feel more confident that they're not sure what they're doing always.' (extract from focus group 1)

The shared understanding was more than just about working in the classroom together. It was also about five practitioners (tutor + four students) grappling with the challenges that a new experience, a new year group, new children and new routines bring. This relates directly to the cyclical process model (Figure 1) where the co-teacher knows a bit more but not everything. I was bringing my experience of being a teacher, of managing a class, of what might work and of planning and resources to a new situation. The concept of 'learning together' with me knowing a bit more to guide learning I believe was a factor in the success of the work. On student commented to me;

> PR …then after you did your first lesson and it was a wreck then I felt alright… It was horrible. But you did rubbish so it was alright. That meant we could as well, so it helped us relax a bit.' (student, focus group 2)

My own reflections on the experience that the above student commented on I recorded in a reflective journal:

> I was teaching and all was not going well. Eventually got through it. My thought was that the students would see me, 'their tutor not being able to 'do it' and lose respect for me. However, the reverse was true. The event turned into a learning experience for all – we discussed the issues effectively and came to realise that we needed to adapt the week's plan to only do input to one class at a time' (extract from reflective diary)

Situated learning advocates the importance of learning in an authentic context and that learning requires social interaction and collaboration. Being there, walking through the experience alongside the students and them with me facilitated a rich discussion borne out of different perspectives on the situation. Fourteen out of 16 school staff questionnaires reported that the experience was good for the students in that they could get assistance in improving their planning and teaching. However, none of the staff expected the students' learning to be as powerful from a carefully

planned lesson not working as expected. This does bring a new of way of looking at a mentorship model – the co-teacher knows a bit more but not everything – but added to that is the notion that by walking through the challenging situation they are demonstrating and modelling reflection in and on action for real.

Mutual trust relationship

The co-teacher has a relationship of mutual trust and respect so as to learn from, with and through the students involved.

Learning relationships came through the findings as a significant factor to the success of the process. For example, the students felt more able to open themselves up more fully to learning and development and didn't feel fearful of making mistakes and being judged. Focus group discussion with the students identified this. The fact that as their personal tutor having taught them for five months prior to the research was significant as the students knew me and had a trust relationship with me which aided their openness to the process.

> *VL …I think I was more nervous about DL and SW than you, because we know you*
>
> *PR …I think I gained a lot of confidence from having you there…*
>
> *AC …Would it have been different if I hadn't been your tutor?*
>
> *LE …I think if one of the other tutors who we didn't know came in it would have been a lot worse. We wouldn't have known their personality and what they expected from us or how we should be*
>
> *VL …the fact we knew you was very important* (extract from focus group 2)

This was a significant factor but what also came through the research was the necessity for a co-teacher to be able to understand the challenges that the students faced and support them through. This connects with the perspective of situated learning already discussed. Focus group discussion with practising teachers involved supports this:

> *DL …Yeah, I would say you can tell that with the way you all communicate with each other, there's a team that's going on…*
>
> *AC …So do you think it's worked, me coming in and…?*
>
> *KG …yeah, I think because it's you and your personality. It might not work with all tutors, because you can talk to them on their level.'*
> (extract from focus group 1)

The findings could be categorised as 'conditions for success'. The co-teaching approach proved successful in that being out of my comfort zone as a co-teacher I could walk through the challenges with the students. It also proved successful in that I already had a bond of trust with these students having been their personal tutor. However, the lack of shared understanding could well have been detrimental to the success of the co-teaching approach. Moreover, it could be argued that my

enthusiasm for the co-teaching approach and my ongoing discussions with placement-based colleagues during the week's teaching may well have been a contributing factor to its success.

Discussion of the findings

One significant observation that draws the three main findings together is that they are all to do with personal skills, relationship and understanding. Nowhere in these particular findings was the focus on the mechanics or process of the co-teaching/mentoring itself and whether the cyclical model was effective or the model of moving from 'analysing need' to 'implementing techniques' to 'evaluating for learning' was an appropriate pathway.

Is it therefore reasonable to suggest that the process is not that important to the students within co-teaching and if the conditions for success are in place, then co-teaching will be successful? Pask and Joy (2007) suggest that where the mentoring process is successful the person (student teacher) is attended to, not just their skill/concept development. Additional literature evidence would support his idea which would leave some of the more process-led elements of the process model redundant or certainly of secondary importance. Developing a sense of identity through the medium of a community of practice can only be done through strong relationships, professional trust relationships. Simpson, Hastings and Hill (2007) draw on the work of Koskela and Ganser (1995) who identify three role categories of school-based mentors: 'role-models', 'guides' and 'facilitators'. By definition, a facilitator role should support the development of a trust relationship between school-based mentor and student teacher. This is then connected to ground work prior to a school-based experience. Emerging from the data was the work of the co-teacher in bringing that to bear. It is clear from the data that the relationship, I as co-teacher had with the student teachers as their personal tutor was crucial to the success of the experience and the process of planning, teaching and evaluation being successful. However, there was no prior relationship with the school for the student teachers, so the question remains as to whether that hindered the process in any way.

Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox and Wassell (2008) suggest that co-generative dialogue plays a central role in implementing co-teaching. This was borne out through the findings of this project. They suggest that communication about collectively-generated practice, and from my study collectively- experienced practice, can lead to a greater focus on student teacher learning. They are open discussions which create a dialectical relationship between co-teacher and students. This arises out of a shared teaching experience. The data collected and analysed demonstrated clearly that the shared teaching experience with a co-teacher in a situation where they too are taking risks and are uncomfortable contributes to effective co-teaching.

The process of co-teaching must support the process of classroom working – planning, teaching, evaluation and assessment, but one thing the cyclical process model presented does not make clear is the conditions of success. The purpose of

co-teaching according to my definition is to provide continuing professional development for the co-teacher while improving the attainment and achievement of the student teacher. These two purposes do work alongside each other – what has been shown through this study is that the attainment of the student was increased as conditions for success were put in place. Three of the four students stated an increased confidence and reflexivity in their personal tutorials at the end of their course and stated that the co-teaching experience was a major contributor to increased success on their final placement.

Through my involvement as co-teacher throughout the process, the school-based tutors' opinions of the student teachers' and their abilities were high. Focus group data from school-based tutors' talks about the team I taught with as 'the A team'. To summarise a section from their focus group: their teaching was pacy and snappy, the plans were in place early, their reflections, flexibility and direction of the learning was stronger than other teams in the school. Was this as a direct result of my involvement? I do believe I put these in place. So therefore 'conditions of success' is not just about those personal attributes, relationship and shared experience, but it is also about the role of the co-teacher, keeping the students on track, supporting their learning and development through walking alongside their teaching, prompting them to think and reflect, asking questions

Edwards (1997:13) talks about a process/function-led approach to mentoring being quite superficial, focusing *'on the training of curriculum deliverers,'* mentoring being a function, like an expert/novice model. However, perhaps there are aspects of this model which are useful. As a co-teacher *'who knows a bit more than the students but not everything'* I can make suggestions from an expert perspective which can ultimately result in higher attainment and being held with higher regard because expectations of planning, teaching and evaluation and assessment have been met. This also allows for professional dialogue.

The cyclical process model only recognises the role of dialogue at the 'evaluating' stage in the process. However, it is clear from the findings that the presence of professional dialogue throughout the co-teaching process, as part of the relationship of trust and support is vital to success. Brookfield (1995) discusses the importance of holding critical conversations about teaching. His view is that critical reflection is a social process, therefore dialogue must play a lead role. The social process of learning and teaching as a team, whilst not having come through in the findings I felt was extremely powerful. Schmidt (2008) recognises that mentors learn from their mentees but also suggests that successful mentoring occurs when the mentor is not deemed an 'expert'. For these students I proved myself to not be an expert. By making myself vulnerable, taking a risk, then students saw me experiencing the issues they experienced, saw how I dealt with it, my reflections and alterations to the session. One of the most profound experiences from this study was having that experience happen on day one, and then seeing a weight fall from the team's shoulders. The weight, they told me, was the pressure and anxiety of having their tutor teaching with them, where before they believed me to be judging them,

needing to step in if they 'did it wrong', now they were able to see me as a colleague who could be part of the learning and teaching community in the classroom. This incident, I believe, was my passport into the student team, while the teaching team was more mutual as a result of my seeming failure. Yet it wasn't a failure because by proving that their tutor was not perfect, it gave them permission to not be perfect and it bridged the gap between tutor and student. It was almost an initiation test to see whether I could truly be part of the team. This was a significant learning experience for me: I had expected to lose face, lose respect but actually I gained it. Goodnough et al. (2009) discuss learning by mentors through a similar experience. They reported that their own teaching was enhanced through this approach supporting collaborative learning and reflection as a social process.

Conclusions drawn from the case study suggest some need for a re-conceptualisation of the mentoring process. This case study did demonstrate that me co-teaching with four of my students did indeed lead to learning and development for all of us and certainly made an impact on the placement provider. However, it also raised some very important questions that may lead to challenging more traditional models of mentoring in teacher education. Certainly if co-teaching is to be taken forward as an approach to mentoring students, then the findings from the case study would suggest that in order for it to be effective and have an impact, significant groundwork needs to have been completed and some important preconditions in place. Analysis of the data collection suggested that groundwork prior to the school-based learning where it would take place was of greater importance. The placement-based learning provider and the mentors involved with the student teachers needed to be inducted into the language and conceptual understanding of the term 'co-teacher'. This may mean reshaping their understanding of the purpose of a university tutor working with students in school and also of the purpose and process of former mentoring practices. The relationship between the mentor and student needs to be one of trust and a willingness to learn on both sides and there needs to be a context for learning that both can learn from.

Conclusion and further study

While this is a very small-scale study, there are some significant areas to be studied further. For co-teaching to be successful, certainly in the context I worked in, the ground must be prepared first, in terms of:

- the school-based learning providers' conceptions of mentoring and the role of the mentor

- sowing the seeds of a strong relationship with the student teachers, from the co-teacher's perspective and school-based mentor's perspective.

- the classroom environment where the co-teaching will take place, so that co-generative dialogue can take place through a genuine shared experience, thus focusing on learning for the student, co-teacher and school-based mentor within a community of professional learning practice.

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