

**We are all in this together: Building learning communities of practice in higher education through quality mentoring in early years initial teacher training**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the nature of effective mentoring practices in training Early Years Teachers in a University. A small-scale enquiry was undertaken where mentees and their mentors were asked about their experiences of meeting the standards to gain Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS). The results indicate that the use of grading to identify training goals was seen by mentors and their mentees as useful in supporting improvements in practice. These professional dialogues were helpful in supporting the students' transitions between the University setting and their placement or professional setting. The research team had some concerns about whether the role of the mentor would be compromised by asking the mentor to assess their mentee in practice, drawing on professional standards and Ofsted scales. Mentees and Mentors revealed that the assessment process yielded enhanced professional development. The success of students to meet professional standards rests on the shoulders of mentors, and mentors say that they felt empowered by training from the University. In this sense mentorship may be seen as a crucial part of the University's Community of Practice, breaking down the boundaries between academic and professional knowledge, and enabling a culture of professional dialogue and critical reflection.

**Key words**

Mentor; mentee; relationships; grading; training, trainee teachers, early childhood educators.

**Introduction**

Mentoring was introduced into education in the UK during the 1980's, to support the retention of newly qualified teachers. It is a practice that is viewed positively within education but is considered to be under-theorised (Devos, 2010). The concept of mentoring, it is claimed, derives from ancient Greek mythology (Callan, 2006), where Telemachus, son of Odysseus, was raised in Odysseus's absence by a critical friend named Mentor. As Garvey (2007) points out, mentoring has been adopted as a practice across many fields, and there are a myriad of approaches, yet there is no agreed definition of the practice (Hobbs and Stovall 2015).

'Standards-based teaching' calls for 'reform-minded mentoring' (Wang and Odell, 2002) and published examples of such approaches are rare, indicating a gap in the literature and a subsequent lack in information made available to Policy makers from the field. Furthermore, Wang and Odell (2002) propose that the traditional mentoring focus used in supporting trainee and newly qualified teachers in schools has tended to assume a supportive role, and that may not be sufficient in achieving reform to professional standards.

This is particularly pertinent in England where recent government led workforce reforms have aspired to increase the numbers of Early Years professionals who hold graduate Teacher Status (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010). As a result, pathways to Early Years Teacher Status are relatively new and are situated within in a changeable political and economic climate. An exploration of the pathways and motivation for study of EYTS is available in Henshall et al. (2018).

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To further a better understanding of the key elements of effective practice for Early Years contexts, this article reports on exploratory interviews held with mentor and mentee pairs on an Early Years Teacher training programme. The wider remit of this research was to generate best practice guidance for providers of Initial Teacher Education for Early Years Teachers, as part of a national policy drive towards a graduate led professionalization of the Early Years workforce. This is one of the few studies that looks at both the experience of the mentee and mentor, acknowledging that this is a two-way relationship that can benefit both parties. The insight made available when researching the mentee-mentor relationship, has implication for training providers, when considering the professional development required of both parties where visionary quality standards are strived for.

Possibilities for developing strong support systems for trainee teachers are extended through such enquiry, with the dual aims of raising outcomes for children, whilst driving up quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings and encouraging trainees to be brave and challenge the status quo, so that young children can thrive. It is equally important that where systems for mentorship are deemed to be successful by both mentee and mentor, that features of this kind of effective leadership are shared with the field. This is particularly useful information within an Early Years context because the challenges faced by those teaching children, aged from birth to five years, are distinctively different to those faced by newly qualified teachers working with older children in compulsory education. The urgency for these insights is particularly pressing due to the absence of existing government guidance relating to this age group. In meeting the professional standards ascribed to Early Years Teacher Status, Early Years Teachers demonstrate commitment and effective practice in raising outcomes for children and their families. Understanding the essential role of mentorship in this transition to becoming an Early Years Teacher may provide insight to Policy Makers and those involved in Quality Inspection procedures.

### **Literature Review**

There is currently little official guidance and empirical research on mentoring in the early years sector (Children's Workforce Development Council. 2008, Rodd, 2013, Hammond, Powell and Smith 2015, Department for Education 2017), and the field lacks a shared professional understanding of the roles of mentor/mentee. (Brockbank and McGill, 2006, Solansky 2010).

For trainee teachers, mentoring enables them to move from being educated themselves, into practice as professionals (Nolan and Molla, 2017). This is an important transition and must necessitate the move through the apprentice liminal state (Meyer and Land 2005) of, not knowing, before becoming integrated into a community of practice.

Callan (2006) points out, mentoring practice does not emerge from a vacuum, it is situated in a social and political context and mentors need to be aware of the contexts within which they are operating. In relation to mentors working with Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) trainees, they would need, for example, to not only be thoroughly familiar with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Department for Education (DfE, 2017b) but also the Teachers' Standards (Early Years), against which trainees are assessed. In addition, mentors need to understand the relevance of these standards, in relation to quality inspection and also in terms of raising outcomes for children in demonstrable ways. (Aubrey, Godfrey, and Harris 2013). This necessitates that beyond providing mentorship, mentors may be involved in the assessment and grading of the trainee, as happens now on the EYTS programme. This could present difficulties in the relationship, not least for the mentor who may experience added pressure. (Day, 2000, Blackman 2010, Cherrington and Thornton 2013). However, if the mentoring relationship is sufficiently strong, it will enable both mentor and mentee to deal with the pressure of professional challenges (Callan and Copp 2006, Fletcher 2012, Lloyd, and Hallet 2010, Rhodes and Fletcher 2013).

How mentors are reflecting standards and show knowledge of quality issues, seems particularly relevant in the current context, where mentors need to be able to model the Teacher Standards (Early Years) for the mentee. The mentor does not just have a responsibility to develop the individual mentee, but also to organisations, for example the ECEC settings where the mentee is working. As part of this, the mentor needs to be aware that the trainee will be working as part of a team, within the setting, and that there will be interpersonal dynamics within that team that must be taken into account, and treated with respect (Callan and Copp, 2006, Hipp and Huffman 2010).

The emphasis here is on the mentor offering guidance and support, to develop the professionalism of the trainee, although it is worth noting, that what it means to be a professional is itself highly contested (Evans, 2010, Moss 2017). In their examination of mentor practices for early years teachers across 7 European nations Hammond, Powell and Smith (2015) consider how to enable an 'engaged pedagogy' using a feminist praxis that encourages mentors and mentees to, co-construct knowledge, contest taken-for granted aspects of policy and practice, and even, subvert hierarchies.

Hook cited in Hammond, Powell, and Smith (2015) further proposes the liberating potential of feminist principles. This may be achieved by considering how to unite public and private experiences so that a holistic approach may be applied to all people. By refusing to accept the mind/body split in learners' experiences, learners may be encouraged to be brave and to challenge the values of how things stand when fossilised in practise. This seems particularly salient in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care where a predominantly female work force, is subject to the imposition of an idea of professionalization, that is incompletely articulated and not honoured in terms and conditions and status (Osgood, 2006, Moss 2017).

As in initial teacher education for other phases, Early Years Teachers need the ability to reflect on their practice. Fowler and Robins (2006) argue that before mentors can support mentees in becoming reflective practitioners, the mentors themselves have to think deeply about their own ability to be reflective; how and when they reflect on their practice and what supports this. Mentors need to develop strategies to promote reflection in trainees, which will not undermine the trainees' confidence in their developing practice (Fowler and Robins 2006, Andrews 2010, Varney 2012, Patterson and Thornton 2014, , Murphy and Butcher, 2015). propose that becoming an effective mentor requires specialist preparation and support.

In a study of a voluntary mentoring scheme for new and geographically isolated early years teachers in Australia, Nolan and Molla (2017) refer to two necessary elements for critical reflection, comfort, and dilemma. They argue that a supportive and respectful mentoring relationship, where confidentiality is ensured, creates comfort, the sense of a safe space in which a mentee can not only discuss their practice but also question and ask for clarification. In terms of dilemma, this is when practitioners encounter practice contexts that do not chime with their expectations.( Chandler et al 2011) The mentoring relationship can offer a space to explore those underlying assumptions that contribute to this state of dilemma, leading to opportunities for changing practice (Bloom et al., 2009; Nolan and Molla, 2017). Critical reflection is essential to the ability to act as agents for change (Bollinger 2009; Patterson, and Thornton, 2014; Nolan and Molla, 2017), a responsibility which is laid on the shoulders of Early Years Teachers.

### **Methodology**

The primary method of data collection was individual face to face interviews. These were semi-structured in nature, giving the possibility to further follow up on participant responses. All interviews, with the consent of participants were voice recorded, so they could be transcribed. A pilot interview was conducted as part of a training session, with a current mentor and university tutor. Interviews

were conducted at the participant's choice of location (either their work setting or the University). Although there was no specified time scale for the interview, the average interview time was 40 minutes. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, to capture examples from experienced mentors, who had both positive and negative mentoring experience to draw on. Data collection began in November 2016 and was complete by January 2017. All interviews were transcribed and then discourse analysis employed to identify thematic areas, that both mentors and mentees, referenced as central to their most successful experiences. Four emergent themes were established. These can be summarized as relationships, transitions, grading, and training.

The research team sought ethical clearance from the University's Ethics Committee and was given permission to undertake this small-scale enquiry. At all times, the team were guided by the principal of ethics of care (Noddings 2013), seeing participants as having active agency within the research who had a stake in the resulting findings.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings suggest that Mentors and Mentees jointly saw their work together as being about using professional standards, and quality measures, to demonstrate professionalism in their practice. The professional dialogue that took place within the mentoring relationship was valuable and secured strong professional connections. Mentees and mentors also referred to how a multitude of transitions were supported by this professional relationship. Goal-setting, has often been seen as a mechanistic approach to professional development, but this study concurs with Grant's (2012) assertion, that when applied to transitions, in trainees cognitive development and learning, goal setting can move practice beyond behavioural competencies, impacting on emotional experiences and attitudes and enhance the expansion of standards-based reform.

The focus around developing competences and skills in the mentee, positions the mentor as a figure of authority (Brookbank and McGill, 2006) but also charges the mentor with a significant responsibility, to be expert in the implementation of quality and assessment regimes. This presses home the importance of supporting mentors with appropriate training and backing by the university. On the surface it may appear that the dual roles of acting as assessor and 'supporter' may conflict with each other, but this was not perceived to be the case by the Mentees or Mentors.

I think assessing your mentee is incredibly important ...I'm that person who they can ask those silly questions to. I'm the person that if they've got a bad day they can come to and cry but ultimately as a mentor my job is to make sure that they are the best, they get the best outcome of the course they possibly can.

When considering the quality of assessment, the key points that were evident in interviews with both Mentors and Mentees, were around training from the university and its consistency, and the effectiveness of online systems and moderation in bringing people together as communities of practice. Ongoing training in mentoring and assessment offered by the university was emphasised by Mentors as being 'invaluable' with a Mentor reporting 'that there was not a part of the course that we didn't get training on' and that we were 'never left in any doubt, when I left the sessions, what I needed to do, and what the university expected'.

These joint training sessions at which all parties the Mentor, the Mentee and the University Tutors were present could perhaps be seen as the most tangible evidence of the desire to build a community of learners. Jameson (2008) considers the evolution of communities of practise(CoP) in post compulsory education, using the lens of the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), acknowledging that all learning is socially situated and occurs between groups of people, who have a shared passion for

developing practise “This ‘practice’ can be linked to a professional role, body of knowledge, topic of interest, issue, or a series of processes or problems” Jameson (2008:19).

Joint Training was also highlighted by Mentors as a tool for reflection on their own practice and skills, enabling them to enrich and fine tune capabilities. Mentors commented that they had thought they were doing well at particular skills, such as target setting, however training enabled them to hone these skills, making them ‘more structured and focused and therefore more helpful to the students’. This can be related to Hobbs and Stovall (2015) who stress the importance of mentors positioning themselves as learners, taking the opportunity to see the potential for their own development, and reflecting deeply on their own skills and abilities.

Another significant feature regarding training and assessment that was cited by Mentors, was the support from the University through engaging mentors and mentees in the logistics of the assessment. Ensuring that assessment was meaningful and working effectively. Mentors also commented that ‘the University listened to what we had to say, if we were struggling with something then we’d have some training, or an email related to it’. This affirms Hammond, Powell and Smith (2015) notion of reciprocal nature of knowledge production, within mentoring relationships, offering the opportunity for mentors, to update their practice with new ideas and gain additional insights. A number of Mentors spoke of their satisfaction in building the relationship with their trainees and also the impact on their own learning and continuing professional development ‘It’s very satisfying being on somebody’s journey, it’s fantastic watching someone (learn)’.

It is evident that discussion surrounding self-analysis and grading helped built a ‘rapport’ between Mentees and Mentors. Grading the EYT was described as a strength throughout the course by both Mentors and Mentees. When discussing its impact on the Mentee /Mentor relationship it was a tacit expectation of the course to be assessed, with one mentee commenting “There was always a professional relationship... I would expect them to assess me” ...

The use of midterm formative assessments as a tool to grade mentees progress, is recognised in the discourse and is linked to discussion as a strategy to motivate progression in Mentees. Target setting and assessing is seen as important by all Mentors “if you don’t assess...you don’t know how they are doing, and you can’t set them targets...to help them move forward. ‘A mentee comments, that it was useful to be graded as she wanted to achieve outstanding overall and her mentor would comment “this is good, show me outstanding” which led to suggestions on how to progress. The midterm assessment was an opportunity for trainees to see how far they had come and all that needed to be achieved before the end of the training period. The targets set at this point helped to galvanize both mentees and mentors into enhanced effort and actions.

A Mentor stressed the importance of ‘giving feedback, setting targets and sometimes, where necessary ... having a conversation that isn’t always the most pleasant conversation but as a mentor I know that that is going to help my mentee develop or improve or reach their goal’ the expectation of being assessed was highlighted at the very beginning of the relationships, with clear relationship boundaries set out by one mentor through discussion “I have high expectations, I expect you to aim for that 1 (the highest grade)...we’ll set our goals, I’ll be there for you, but you’ve got to give me the same amount of commitment’.

Mentees also believed these assessments reinforced the relationship “if anything it sort of strengthened it, because it showed her how she’s helped me to progress onto what I am now”. Two Mentees referred to future intentions to become a mentor after a period of adjustment to their new roles. The idea of mentoring appears to be implicit in their practice and with it there is an appreciation of the

value of mentoring, despite concerns around placing too much burden on newly qualified professionals.

Moderation was, seen as central to assessment and mentor development with Mentors highlighting, they were observed by members of the University Team while observing their trainees in the placement ECEC settings, so that there was consistency across the mentoring team. This was an opportunity for Mentors to get feedback on their own practise and to engage in a professional dialog about their practise and pedagogy.

### **Challenging issues**

The beginning of the Mentee /Mentor relationships were often problematic where Mentees were expected to initiate mentoring conversations. The Trainees in the study had insufficient experience and understanding of mentoring to do this. It was found that, at least at the start of the relationship, a more mentor-led, structured approach, enabled Mentors and Mentees to build connections with each other. This mentor-led approach gave way in time, as Mentees took more control, and a more dialogue based, reflective relationship developed.

It should also be noted that the timing and expectation of when contact was available was different between Mentees and mentors, with Mentees having expectations of being able to access support at weekends and evenings and the Mentor not always sharing this expectation. These expectations were often unspoken, but it was interesting to note when these tacit boundaries were crossed it led to turbulence in the relationship.

Supporting newly qualified Early Years Teachers as they transition into the workforce is also problematic. There is no reduced workload, as there is for newly qualified colleagues within primary education, and no compulsory continuing professional development afforded to Early Years teachers. Neither is there paid time to attend such training, and no compulsory non-contact time from face to face contact with children during the working day. The extended hours of work, with ECEC settings open from 8 am till 6 pm, or longer, all add to the challenge of supporting professional development.

Additionally, the major challenge remains as to how to recruit and retain sufficient experienced and qualified mentors, who have the skills to support and inspire trainees. Such mentors need also to welcome the opportunity to enter the learning space themselves. The funding of this work is also an issue, as currently universities are not funded for the cost of providing mentors to students.

### **Conclusion**

This study supports the notion that mentoring can bring benefits to both mentee and mentor and that the act of working and training together alongside a Higher educational establishment, encourages the foundation of a Community of Learning (Lave and Wenger,1991). The benefits of a one to one focused teaching and learning relationship are valued by trainees and these trainees often express the desire to become a mentor themselves; demonstrating the confidence to share their expertise, within just one year of qualifying. This is very different from the model within primary schools where Newly Qualified Teachers are seen as in need of support and have a low status within the organisation.

Interviews with mentors and mentees demonstrate that the mentoring role is a holistic one, that includes developmental support within the context of a professional relationship. Scaffolding professional and reflective dialogue around the Early Years Teacher Status assessment framework and the OFSTED Inspection framework, allowed mentees to have a clear focus around their learning goals. Callan (2006) highlighted mentoring in an ECEC setting does not take place in a vacuum. The political and social environment that surrounds early years settings, the diversity and complexity of provision,

and its complex funding, necessarily impacts on trainees and the mentoring / mentee relationship. The interest and focus on early education as a method of closing the later education attainment gap, is continuing, with funding for vulnerable two-year olds as well as universal provision for three- and four-year olds. Although the statutory age of school entry remains unchanged, at the term after a child's fifth birthday, the reality is that 98% (DfE) (2017c) of three and four-year olds are in provision.

A small-scale study such as this can only give an incomplete snapshot into a moment in time, into a complex and dynamic relationship within a changing eco system. It is therefore hard to make generalisations or come to firm conclusions. As other studies have found before (Callan and Copp 2016; Andrews 2010) the nature and the quality of the relationship between the mentee and the mentor is key in the success of such a partnership, and this is an area which would benefit from further research.

#### *Recommendations for further research*

- Further exploration of the benefits of a community of practice model where all parties (student, mentor, and university lecturers) profit from involvement in the process.
- Exploration of the potential of mentoring programmes as a tool for improving satisfaction outcomes and impact for Early Years Teachers, looking at the potential of assessment as a tool for driving quality.

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