The Problematics of Mentoring, and the Professional Learning of Trainee Teachers in the English Further Education Sector

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ABSTRACT

This paper, drawing on research carried out as part of a qualitative case study, explores the effectiveness of the mentoring of trainee teachers within the further education sector. Drawing on data collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from mentors and mentees in a network of further education colleges in the North of England and from documentary analysis of the forms and reports that are produced by the mentoring process, the paper explores three key problematic issues: firstly, the ways in which mentors and mentees define and understand their roles; secondly, the extent to which both mentors and mentees find worth or value within their professional relationship; and thirdly, the processes by which these invariably informal relationships are established. The paper concludes by suggesting that the complexities and vagaries of mentor-mentee relationships that are outlined both in this and other research raise further questions concerning what mentees learn as a consequence of the mentoring relationship.

Keywords: English Further Education Sector, Mentor-Mentee Relationship, Mentoring, Professional Learning, Teacher Training

INTRODUCTION: POSITIONING MENTORING WITHIN TEACHER TRAINING FOR THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN ENGLAND

The English further education (FE) sector predominantly caters for students aged 16-19 who are following technical or vocational programmes of study. On completion of their courses, most students will enter employment, although some will progress to university. The FE sector also offers a range of programmes for adults, some of who may be returning to learning after a protracted period away from formal education, perhaps to update or refresh existing skills. Colleges within the FE sector also play a central role in delivering courses in literacy and numeracy to adults. The FE sector can be seen as a sub-section of the lifelong learning
sector, a term used to encompass not only the work done in mainstream further education (FE) colleges, but also in adult and community colleges, work-based learning provision and such like. It is teachers in the FE sector that are the focus of the research that is reported here.

The structure and organisation of professional training of FE teachers is distinct from the professional training of teachers for primary and secondary schools in three ways. Firstly, it is predominantly delivered on an in-service rather than a pre-service basis. New entrants to the profession gain employment, usually on the basis of their technical or vocational qualifications, and then study for their teacher-training qualifications on a part-time basis. Secondly, the syllabus for FE teacher training is generic rather than subject specific. Rather than following specified learning pathways that might, for example, differentiate trainee sociology teachers from trainee electrical installation teachers, trainee FE teachers all follow the same generic syllabus. It is only in their assignments that subject specialisms become conspicuous. Thirdly, FE teacher training has only recently, in contrast to primary and secondary teacher training, become subject to audit and inspection by government, through the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services, and Skills (Ofsted).

In their first report relating to the training of further education teachers, Ofsted noted that:

“The lack of systematic and effective mentoring arrangements for trainees on the majority of FE teacher training courses is a major weakness. Few colleges provide their trainees with sustained support from experienced practitioners who can assist them in developing good teaching skills in their own subject. There is an over-reliance on informal forms of support, and the roles of mentors are often not defined in sufficient detail. Where mentoring support is provided, the standard is extremely variable and, in most cases, not well resourced.” (Ofsted, 2003, pp. 18-19)

In response to this, the provision of mentoring has grown in political as well as pedagogical importance over the last few years (Wallace & Gravells, 2007). The political importance is a consequence of the Ofsted inspection regime. The pedagogical importance is a consequence of the strategy of using mentoring to help trainee teachers in “developing good teaching skills in their own subject [my emphasis]” (Ofsted, 2003, pp. 18-19) as a way of addressing the lack of subject specific pedagogy within the FE teacher training curriculum more generally.

Mentoring has thus moved away from being an informal tool for professional learning, for example in helping to orient new employees (whether teachers or not) to the working cultures and practices of an organisation. Instead, it has become an object of assessment and audit within the FE teacher training curriculum. In this context mentors are required to provide support to trainee teachers – also referred to as mentees – in a number of ways that serve to meet particular outcomes of the curriculum that are related to subject specialist pedagogy. Through practices such as professional conversations, the sharing of resources, support in learning about the workplace, and most crucially the observation of teaching practice, the mentoring process has become part of a formal curriculum as opposed to an informal curriculum, within the FE workplace. These processes are usually captured within an individual learning plan or personal development plan, and these in turn are usually included in a portfolio that forms part of the assessment regime of the teacher-training programme (Thompson et al., 2009), which can therefore be seen as fulfilling a primarily summative role, although the developmental aspects of the process also allow for formative assessment as well. Put simply, the mentoring relationship becomes an object for assessment within the teacher-training curriculum. Mentors’ observations of mentees’ teaching can therefore be characterised as high stakes assessment (Knight, 2006). They tend to be implemented on a pass/fail basis, and without a successful
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