

## **How do school-based mentors support student teachers' learning in school? An investigative survey into the perceptions of teacher educators in England**

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### **Introduction**

A research project carried out by ESCalate ITE (the Education Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy, Initial Teacher Education section) for the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) (Westrup, 2009) looked at the Continuing Professional Development Needs of Teacher Educators in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and School-based Mentors in Schools. The findings of this research illustrated how important the mentoring role is perceived to be by teacher educators, and how school-based mentors seem to feel that this mentoring role can be enhanced with more training and support. An analysis of survey and focus group data from this research project indicates that teacher educators felt that the majority of the challenges to successful mentoring are associated with communication problems between teacher educators and school-based mentors. One of the main recommendations of the report was that training and support for school-based mentors needs to be strengthened and that this is particularly necessary within an educational context where the curriculum is in a state of flux. When the findings of this report were shared with a group of teacher educators at the UCET (Universities Council for the Education of Teachers) in 2009, the fact that they felt strongly that the school-based mentor role needed strengthening is illustrated well by the following comment:

‘Our preference would be for the term teacher educator to be used for both HEIs and schools rather than one being seen as mentors. Both are teacher educators but with different professional locations and perspectives. [There is a need] to work together to research and reflect on common issues informed by an agreed set of values and purposes’.

In 2010, in order to begin further investigations into the role of the school-based mentor, a group of TERN (Teacher Education Research Network: a research network based in the Northwest of England) colleagues decided to conduct an initial small scale research pilot. They based the research pilot on the following question for teacher educators: How do school-based mentors support student teachers' learning in school? The purpose was to gather the perceptions of teacher educators by sending a short survey to individuals using Bristol online surveys (BOS online). The network of TEAN (the Teacher Education Advancement Network) based at the University of Cumbria was used to distribute the survey. The aims of the survey were explained to respondents as follows: ‘to discover your experiences and your expectations of how school-based mentors support student teachers' learning in schools’. Respondents were assured of the complete anonymity of their responses, as guaranteed by BOS online. The survey was deliberately short in order to encourage a quick response and it was designed to act as a starting place for future investigations.

## **The findings**

We received 33 replies by the beginning of March 2010; all respondents were based in England although other countries of the UK had been included in the mail-out inviting participation in the survey. The age phase with which the respondents were associated was evenly distributed; 15 (45.5%) from primary, 13 (39.4%) from secondary and the rest (5: 15.2%) from both primary and secondary.

The first question we asked was: 'In your experience, to what extent do school-based mentors engage in developing the following? Teaching and learning strategies, behaviour management, assessment, planning, working with other adults, reflection'.<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked to respond using a scale of 1- 5 'where 1 is very little and 5 is a great deal'. Teaching and learning strategies, behaviour management and assessment all yielded very similar results with most respondents feeling that school-based mentors did engage in the development of these skills. Behaviour management scored most 5s (66%) whereas teaching and learning strategies, assessment and planning were more evenly divided between 4 and 5. The development of working with other adults grouped results around the mid-point with few scores of 5. The results for reflection gave a different picture with most respondents (51% approximately) choosing the middle score of 3 and slightly more (36% approximately) choosing 4 or 5 rather than 1 or 2 (23% approximately).

Respondents were invited to give full written answers for the remaining questions in the survey. Question 4 asked: 'In your opinion what challenges do school-based mentors experience in their role?' Time featured very highly in the answer to this. 29 out of the 33 respondents highlighted lack of time as being the greatest problem. These comments were typical:

- Constraints of time
- Finding quality time to give to trainees
- Having protected time to meet with trainee teachers
- Major challenge is time for the mentoring
- Pressures of time and competing priorities for school

Other comments focused on the following aspects:

- Balance: Balancing the training and mentoring aspects with school and subject demands
- Going beyond survival
- Focusing guidance on subject related knowledge, pedagogy and attitudes rather than generic issues

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix i

- The lack of status in the job
- The perception that schools don't see the value of their [mentors'] work - not the time commitment involved.

Question 5 asked: 'In your opinion what benefits do school-based mentors draw from their role?' The responses which featured in all answers were: development of their [the mentors'] own practice and the opportunity for self reflection:

- Generally speaking they become more self-aware of their own teaching roles, as role models. This often leads to their reflecting upon and 'sharpening' their own practice
- Professional development – an opportunity to reflect

Teacher educator respondents in the survey thought that the trainees were helping the school-based mentors to update their own practice, consider the practices of the school in which they were teaching, and come face to face with new ideas:

- Injection of ideas and enthusiasm
- Challenge and motivation derived from talking about and demonstrating best practice
- Time to reflect on own and school's practice
- Encountering ITE tutors and students – new/challenging ideas

There was some acknowledgement of the development of mentoring skills (7 respondents):

- Developing mentoring and coaching skills
- Professional development – an opportunity to ... develop peer mentoring skills

And a few (4) hints that they were training the next generation 'which brings its own rewards':

- Passing on of skills to the next generation and the satisfaction that this brings, this is not measurable and not quantifiable.

Question 6 asked: 'In your opinion what makes for an effective school-based mentor? The following list summarises the results:

- A good listener
- Flexibility
- Clarity of own aims
- Being prepared to take risks
- Being prepared to share
- Being reflective
- Matches training to the individual
- A good and respected teacher

- One who has 'people' skills
- Approachable
- Good time manager
- Empathetic
- A senior member of the school
- Highly organised
- Allows trainee to develop their own professional self
- Ability to critically engage with students
- Open-minded
- Good judgement
- Willing to engage in partnership with provider
- A critical friend
- Good communicate
- Has experience
- Honest
- Able to give effective feedback
- Patience
- Able to challenge
- Enthusiastic about teaching
- Friendly
- Understands ITE
- Emotionally literate

### **Discussion**

In contrast to the ESCalate ITE research, the TERN pilot survey focused on one side of the ITE partnership- that of the school-based mentor – and looked at that role through the eyes of the other side of the partnership – that of the teacher educators in HEIs. It can thus be argued that this is a biased view of that role. However, the bias was deliberate in this first small pilot study and intended only to give some starting points to assuage the curiosity of the researchers as to 'what would be the outcome?' of this apparently simple question. We therefore acknowledge the limitations of the survey and acknowledge too that the size of the sample answers is small. Generalisability is therefore limited, but, we would argue, a rich yield of pathways to pursue has been unearthed.

Responses to the first question: 'In your experience, to what extent do school-based mentors engage in developing the following?' were unsurprising in as much as it would seem likely that teaching and learning, behaviour management, assessment and planning lie at the heart of teaching practice and would feature highly on mentors' agendas and be encouraged by teacher mentors. However the somewhat less positive results for development of working with adults suggest that the focus of development of working with children precludes this other area which is of importance in the life of a school. Particularly in the light of multi-agency initiatives, it would seem important to encourage beginning teachers to learn to work with other adults in the school situation for the ultimate benefit of the children, and this is an area that mentors could be more aware of. The results for 'reflection' suggest various possibilities. There was less of a feeling that school-based mentors

were developing reflection in student teachers. Is this indicative of the fact that the daily imperatives of school life exclude the time for reflection? Do school-based mentors not engage in reflection themselves and therefore do not encourage the students to do so? Or do the teacher educators see reflection as 'within their realm' and not feel that it crosses over into school practice? If reflection is seen as a basic attribute for teachers (Zeichner and Liston, 1996; Schön, 1987), then the communication between school-based mentors and teacher educators, hinted at in the Westrup (2009) study is necessary to develop a joint approach to this fundamental skill.





That time should be perceived as the main challenge to the school-based mentor's role is not unsurprising and suggests that this is a challenge unlikely to go away. Solutions may be sought in looking at ways to handle this lack of time by focussing on the other challenges mentioned here – those of balance and improving the status of the mentoring roles in school.

It is admirable that, according to the perceptions of teacher educators, school-based mentors should find inspiration and regeneration of their own practice from their mentoring role, but somewhat limiting if that is as far as it goes. What about what they give to the student teachers? The outcomes of this survey suggest a one way benefit from a highly motivated and confident set of students facing a jaded set of practising teachers, unable to regenerate without their help. Granted there was some acknowledgement of the importance of the mentors' role but it was minimal. In the quest to raise the status of the mentor role, what mentors offer the next generation of teachers could well be a motivating factor to enhance the satisfaction gained from the role. There could be some interesting conversations between teacher educators and school-based mentors if the list of the attributes of an effective school-based mentor as seen through the eyes of the teacher educators was shared with them; and even more if the school-based mentors were asked to create their own list. This returns us to the point made in the Westrup (2009) research that communication between both parties is key and the next step perhaps in the TERN group's research.






Appendix i

**3. In your experience to what extent do school-based mentors engage in developing the following?**






**3.a. Teaching and Learning strategies**

1:		n/a	0
2:		n/a	2
3:		n/a	4
4:		n/a	11
5:		n/a	16



**3.b. Behaviour management**














1:		n/a	1
2:		n/a	1
3:		n/a	1
4:		n/a	8
5:		n/a	22

**3.c. Assessment**

1:		n/a	1
2:		n/a	3
3:		n/a	6
4:		n/a	10
5:		n/a	13

**3.d. Planning**

1:		n/a	1
2:		n/a	3

3:		n/a	6
4:		n/a	10
5:		n/a	13
<b>3.e. Working with other adults</b>			
1:		n/a	1
2:		n/a	8
3:		n/a	11
4:		n/a	10
5:		n/a	3
<b>3.f. Reflection</b>			
1:		n/a	1
2:		n/a	3
3:		n/a	17
4:		n/a	6
5:		n/a	6