

The impact of experience on student mentors' conceptualisations of mentoring.

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Abstract

This paper examines the findings of a qualitative research study conducted in the context of Australian preservice teacher education. The study looks at impact of mentoring experience on student mentors' conceptualisations of mentoring. It draws on data from entry and exit surveys and interviews with student mentors. The paper has first positions the research within the literature, examines the research context and the research methodology. It then presents the research findings as three case studies of student mentors' experiences of mentoring and concludes with a discussion of findings that relate to student mentors perceptions of mentoring and teaching practice.

Key words: mentoring, experience, context, teacher education

Introduction

A persistent representation in the mentoring literature is the mentor as sage-like "an older, wiser, experienced person" influencing a younger protégé (Cohen 1995, p. 1). Russell and Adams (1997, p.2) envisage the mentor as a senior, experienced colleague. Similarly, Roberts (2000, p. 162) suggests that the mentor is "a more knowledgeable and experienced person". Not only that but Daloz (1986, p. 16) argues that the mentor is infused with magic and plays a key role in individual transformation.

A related representation is that of the mentor as teacher, for example, Yamamoto (1988, p. 183) has argued that all teaching worthy of the name contains an element of mentoring. Cohen and Galbraith (1995, p. 6) regard the mentor as the wise teacher who "accompanies, encourages, instructs, challenges, and even confronts the mentee." However, Schlager, Poirier and Means disagree arguing instead that:

Mentors are distinguished from teachers in that they are less concerned with content coverage and evaluation and more like masters or consultants, reacting to the learner's situation, relying on experience to model and convey ideas, acting as a resource, and implicitly interweaving technical knowledge and skills with cultural info and values (in McLellan, 1996, p. 249).

Le Cornu (2005, p. 356) points out that there has been a recent modification in the literature of the traditional hierarchical conceptualisation of mentoring to include "a collaborative or collegial relationship" with a shift away from the traditional "hierarchical one-way relationship." An eclectic representation of the mentor fulfilling multiple roles can also be found in Wilkin (in Stephenson 1997, p. 7) who argued that the mentor can be coach, counsellor, teacher and therapist. This eclecticism is also recognised by Clutterbuck (in Brockbank and McGill, 2006, p. 114) who suggests mentors draw on an appropriate array of models, such as, coaching or counselling,

whichever is appropriate to the particular circumstances. Roberts (in Hall 2003, p. 7) further distinguishes between mentors being sensitive to others while also being goal orientated.

The literature also identifies a range of core characteristics associated with the mentor role. Yamamoto (2001 or 1988, p. 183) argues mentors should have skills in listening, knowing when to support and challenge. Roberts (2000, p.81) makes a distinction between essential attitudes, such as, reflective practice and contingent attributes including role modelling, sponsoring and coaching. The core characteristics identified by Terrion and Leonard (2007, p.155-161) include communication skills, supportiveness, trustworthiness, empathy, enthusiasm and flexibility. Perception, integration, understanding and management of emotion are listed by Mayer and Cobb (in Hawkey, 2006, p. 145) as essential mentor characteristics.

Despite the range of literature available, Capstick (2004, p. 33) argues that mentoring remains an ill-defined term and Hall (2003, p.4) refers to mentoring as a “very fuzzy and ill-defined concept”. This paper engages in the definitions debate by examining conceptualisations of mentoring from a student mentor perspective. The next section examines the research context and the research methodology and following this the research findings are presented in the form of three case studies. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings that relate to student mentors perceptions of mentoring and teaching practice.

The Research Context

All mentor programmes are context specific and mentoring cannot be seen as independent of context. The reason for this is that all relationships are shaped by the environment in which they are set (Cox, 2003, p. 9). The current research is set within a series of related contexts namely, the Australian context of preservice teacher education and the specific university and faculty context of the mentor programme. Within the broad national context it is significant that preservice education is situated in universities with limited school experiences and that the mentor model adopted a team rather than the traditional one-on-one mentoring approach. The team approach involved a team of two to three student mentors facilitating first year transition workshops of 20 students for the first eight weeks of the first semester each year.

Faculty academic support for student mentors is provided through mentor training workshops and through an elective unit of study; *Mentoring in Education Contexts*. This unit is positioned within an interpretive sociological framework and draws on an extensive literature including, phenomenological sociology (Schutz, 1964, 1970; Berger & Luckmann, 1991), risk sociology (Beck, 1992), youth studies literature (Jackson, 2003), mentoring (Colley 2003) and first year experience transition literature (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Scanlon, 2004; Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007). As well as reading within this extensive literature students are required to draw on their own educational experiences, specifically, mentoring first year students and review these experiences within the context of the theoretical literature.

Methodology

The theoretical framework in which the mentor programme and the research is grounded is the phenomenological work of Alfred Schutz (1964, 1970) and Schutz and Luckmann (1973). The phenomenological dimension of the research emphasised the explication of the meaning of mentoring as everyday experience for the research participants. The discussion in this paper is based on the findings of a qualitative research project in which 12 student mentors participated in entry and exit surveys and two semi-structured interviews. One interview was conducted in the first week of the mentor programme and the second following the completion of the programme. The purpose of the entry surveys was to elicit a number of things from student mentors prior to their experiences of mentoring, these included, their reasons for becoming mentors, the role of professional development in this decision, their conceptualisations of mentoring and the core characteristics they associated with the role of mentor. The purpose of the exit surveys was to

locate the role of experience in either sustaining or modifying students' initial conceptualisations of mentoring and its core characteristics and determining the extent to which student mentors found the mentoring role useful in their professional development.

In the initial data analysis students' answers to the survey and interview questions constituted initial research categories. Analysis of students' answers to these questions were analysed by iteratively reading all the entry surveys and interviews followed by the exit surveys and interviews. Common themes were then located across the range of students. This was followed by what Eisner (1981, p. 6) calls "indwelling", that is, the imaginative immersing by the researcher in the experience of the research participants. From this process there emerged narrative accounts of the impact of the mentor experience on students' initial conceptualisations of mentoring. From this data three case studies were selected as interesting and representative of the research findings and are examined below.

Case Studies of Experience

The experiences that student mentors found significant included, facilitating transition workshops, participating in academic seminars, encountering theoretical constructs in the academic seminars, reflecting on their experiences and observing other mentors. In order to capture conceptualisations of mentoring from the perspective of the research participants the words of the mentors are extensively used in the case studies.

Hannah

Hannah had both altruistic and professional development reasons for engaging in the mentoring process. When she embarked on the mentoring role she anticipated the experience would make her a better person and a better teacher, "I am mostly doing this to help somebody. Also, I need to look at myself in a classroom-type situation." The professional development motivation arose from her conceptualisation of mentoring as a teacher-like role. The core characteristics she identified as critical to this role included having "a good balance of academic and social knowledge" and giving advice and tips to first year students. From a social perspective she also felt mentors could assist students in feeling "a bit more comfortable and laid-back."

This conceptualisation of mentoring did not undergo substantive change as a result of experience; rather experience broadened Hannah's original conceptualisation. Through experience she did, however, observe the multiple roles of mentoring and the way different individuals inhabit the role of mentor.

It was so strange to see people who you think of as friends in a different way. It was actually the biggest experience I got out of mentoring. I now would not work with anyone I want to keep a friendship with, or a healthy relationship with.

What Hannah observed was the "massive changes in people's personalities" in different segments of their life-world. She anticipated members of the mentor team would be more supportive of each other. Instead she found strong personalities at times engaged in confrontation. She also commented that one of her mentor partners was "completely the same when doing everything" which she found "quite disturbing." The reason Hannah felt this happened was because her partner "approaches everything very much in a teacher role, criticising and analysing absolutely everything". She identified this mentor as particularly single-minded, "She has her plan and the plan just has to happen...she's very straight-laced, very professional, and a lot of times we clashed."

Hannah makes a significant comment here on her notion of teacher professionalism. It is the "single-minded" individual whom she equates with being professional. Her other mentor partner was very different "more like an experienced sort of friend" who "thinks a lot more about where

the students are coming from". For Hannah adjusting to different individuals was more significant to the mentoring role than adopting a critical stance or being organised. It was she said not always necessary to "analyse things" there were times when "you just need to just be."

Hannah cited professional development as a significant factor in mentoring and therefore it is not surprising that she used the experience to reflect on the major differences between teaching and mentoring.

As a mentor you share knowledge that is very personal ... when you're a teacher you have to transfer knowledge. Being a teacher is about the knowledge. But, being a mentor, it's about the personal thing, it's about the connection.

The essential difference between mentoring and teaching is a subtle epistemological one between personal knowledge gained through experience and public knowledge. Sharing personal knowledge Hannah suggested created a connectiveness between mentor and mentee in a way that did not happen with shared public knowledge. Thus, Hannah provided an interesting example of the epistemological difference between teaching and mentoring and the different kinds of knowledge this involved.

You would not be a mentor if you're teaching students about World War I, but you can be a mentor if you teach them about how to sit through a World War I exam, because that's a different sort of knowledge.

The experience of journaling was a critical component of Hannah's practice as a mentor because she journaled on what she called "a larger level". That is, rather than focus solely on reviewing workshop strategies she used the journal to reflect on the way she related to other mentors. For example, she explained how her previous friendship with one of her mentor partners developed a professional dimension as a result of mentoring together "we bombard each other with what we are learning in mentoring," Mentoring became a bridge between mentoring practice and the practice of teaching because these mentoring conversations led to others about practicum and teaching.

Formal observation of other mentor workshops was a significant experience for Hannah as it was through these observations that she concluded everyone understands mentoring in a different way. This did not prevent her making critical comments when she observed "a boring workshop with minimal linkage between the ideas."

The most significant experience in the academic seminars Hannah said was not that she was "learning new stuff" but rather she was encountering new ideas in a systematic way. Phenomenology was appealing particularly the concept of the "life-world" which enabled her to look at the different segments of her life world and the characteristics she displayed in these segments. The theoretical component of the workshops did not so much change her but "it does make me more aware of my mentor hat and my teaching hat." Overall the impact of experience on Hannah's concept of mentoring resulted in this final comment. 'You know, I could not define a mentor now. It's too hard. It's too much not concrete.'

Gloria

Though the concept of mentoring was foreign to Gloria she nonetheless anticipated it would provide her with an opportunity to teach in a different kind of space to the school classroom. She envisaged a mentor as "someone who would be looked up to and believed to have all the answers." Mentoring is an important factor in teaching, although the mentor role was more restricted than the teaching role because the mentor shows the mentees "the ropes ... tells them all the secrets" but there is no disciplinary element. The use of "secrets" is interesting as it signals something of the mythical quality of the mentor and also alludes to the private nature of mentoring knowledge. The core characteristics critical to mentoring are self-confidence and the ability to develop an

atmosphere of trust and support. Gloria reflected on the differences between teaching and mentoring, "It's a bit like being a teacher, but teachers are not only mentors they are far more."

A major difference between mentoring and teaching lies in the egalitarian nature of mentoring. Being a mentor is about behaving in a particular way, that is, "I always try to be on their level." Gloria explained she was unlike some other mentors she had observed who liked to impress the mentees. She did not do this and explained that with her there were "no real barriers" between herself as mentor and the mentees. Gloria found facilitating the workshops a challenging experience partly due to the perceived strengths of one of her mentoring partners. She explained that her "partner was very bubbly and was sort of the lead mentor." Because of this she described herself "I was really passive until the workshop I facilitated alone." The absence of "the lead mentor" enabled Gloria to assume the lead role which was for her 'the best moment in mentoring.'

The formal observation of other students reinforced Gloria's perceptions of the role interpretations in her own mentor team as again she was able to "sort of pick out who was me in the three mentors". She discovered in any group situation like the mentoring partnership "you're always going to have the leader and the really passive one and the in-between one." The observation did not reveal any new workshop strategies to her but gave her greater insight into her own mentoring.

Gloria's comments on the academic seminars provide a glimpse of her notions of preservice teacher education. Curriculum studies were about strategies rather than ideas and as such she felt were less valuable to her development as a teacher, "Well, strategies aren't really ideas, because you can only use them maybe in one lesson. But an idea you can carry around and keep it in the back of your mind." *Mentoring in Educational Contexts* was about ideas and "linked things in the classroom to what is going on around you in society." What is significant for Gloria in preservice education is the enduring nature of ideas as opposed to single lesson strategies. The applied theoretical approach Gloria found critical for her professional development because it encouraged her to be reflective.

I am actually listening, and I am reflecting, I'm in the lecture, and I'm thinking about the people in the classroom. I am kind of thinking how the theories explain things that are not obvious about where people are at, where we are all at in a big sort of way.

Theory was used by Gloria to bridge the gap between her preservice education and the reality of teaching in real classrooms.

Alice

Alice joined the mentor programme for a number of different reasons; one was to involve herself "within university life". The other was her concern for the welfare of first year students who frequently find the transition to university "a tumultuous rite of passage". Alice wanted to make a difference, to do something to be proud of, "because we're doing something at the university to make the experience a bit nicer for people." There was also a professional development dimension in that mentoring provided more teaching opportunities and so "bridged the divide between the theory of university and the pragmatism of the schoolyard."

Prior to her experience as a mentor Alice regarded the mentor as a "learned friend" primarily working for the benefit of the mentees. The core characteristics required to do this included, listening skills, good communication skills, a positive nature, empathetic, diligent, self-confidence, collaborative, cooperative and enthusiastic. These characteristics Alice argued would result in a mentor "treating people as individuals" and also "creating a nice, structured environment" in which challenge, support and cooperation could flourish. This was an environment which was mutually beneficial to both mentor and mentee. Alice recognised that there were similarities between teaching and mentoring, however, while mentoring is one of the foundations of teaching, "teaching is more than mentoring."

Journaling was important for Alice because she said, “Writing a journal makes you aware of your own actions, and of other people’s actions as well.” Most of her journal entries were observations of other people and these led her to “understand my own teaching practices by critiquing someone else’s.” The formal observational component of the programme Alice found interesting because it gave her a more objective view “a mirror for reference” which reflected her own mentoring practices. Observing other mentors Alice found was “one of the most useful things in the course” because it encouraged reflection on her own practice and the strengths of her mentor team.

Alice also observed tension in some mentor groups caused by different ideas as to “what it meant to be a mentor.” She gave examples of groups where “the mentors were interrupting each other, or trying to finish each other’s sentences.” This did not mean that there were no disagreements in her team but what was different was that “we were each at least passionate about mentoring in our group.”

Experience indicated to Alice that teaching and mentoring are essentially different because mentoring lacks a disciplinary and an administrative element. The mentor, for example, is not “in a judging position” because they do not mark students’ performance. As a result the mentor relationship is more of a “friendship rather than a disciplinarian” one.

The theories Alice encountered in the academic seminars struck “a working balance between the practical and the theoretical, between the personal and the empirical.” This provided her with the unique opportunity to put theoretical knowledge to immediate practical use. Alice was attracted to “identity formation” which encouraged her to question her own identity formation as a mentor and a teacher. Alice confronted, through interaction with theory, the issue of overlapping and competing identities of mentor and teacher. The theories were also a focus for continued discussions outside the classroom.

The mentor experience had a profound impact on Alice in the sense that she considered the role of mentoring beyond her preservice education. She saw the role of mentor promoted lifelong learning and development which she intended to echo in her professional life. She planned to seek a mentor in her first year in the profession. Later in her career she anticipated she might become a mentor to beginning teachers.

What was evident in the findings from all 12 students in the study and which is illustrated in the three case studies presented here is that each student’s conceptualisation of mentoring was modified though not significantly changed by contextualised experience. Students remarked that experience had “deepened” or “broadened” their pre-experience conceptualisation of the role of mentor.

Discussion

I argued at the beginning of this paper that context is critical to an understanding of the research findings, for as Dey (1993. p. 110) argues “meaning depends on context”. That this research was situated within the Australian framework of teacher education and within an education faculty and a programme charged with the preparation of preservice teachers obviously impacted on the research. It might be argued, for example, that the pro-social behaviours attributed to mentors regardless of context apply particularly to preservice teachers because such behaviour is regarded as a critical element in teaching. The team and group approach of the programme was also significant as was situating mentoring in the classroom-like environment of the workshop. That there were also two transitions, namely, the obvious transition of first year students to university but also the transition of student mentors to professional practice was also significant.

The research reveals that all of the 12 participants volunteered to mentor for two principal reasons, nurturing and professional development. Of the two motivations professional development was the

most significant for all participants in that each of the student mentors commented they expected to become better classroom teachers as a result of the experience. Here again the role of context is critical for in the context of the preservice teacher programme the student mentors aimed to improve their professional expertise as teachers through classroom-like experiences. It is generally agreed that being a better professional is a common aim of mentor programmes aimed at career development. This however generally refers to the development of the mentee whereas in the current research it is the mentors' professional development which is highlighted.

It was suggested earlier in the paper that the student mentors rather than change their conceptualisation of mentoring basically retained their initial conceptualisation. This conceptualisation, however, was broadened or deepened as a result of the mentor experience. For example, this broadening implied a number of different things, for example, for Hannah it meant identifying a substantial epistemological difference between teaching and mentoring. This difference was between the essential, transmitted knowledge of the teacher and the personal, volunteer knowledge of the mentor. Gloria came to understand mentoring required a disciplinary and a challenging element while Alice struggled with the concept of teacher and mentor and through her experience came to understand that while mentoring is a part of teaching, teaching is broader than mentoring. Each of the student mentors began with a conceptualisation of mentoring as "teacher-like" and rather than change this conceptualisation experience led them to incorporate new elements into this original conceptualisation. It can be argued that the classroom-like context of mentoring model was responsible for both sustaining and altering in different ways the teacher-like conceptualisation of the participants.

These findings do not accord with the more traditional view of the mentor as "older, wiser" (Cohen, 1995, p. 1). Within the situated context of the mentor programme this is not surprising as the mentors themselves noted the similarity in age between themselves and the mentees. The participants' comments concur with Yamamoto's (1988) view that teaching contains elements of mentoring. Moreover, the mentor as conceived by the research participants is more reflective of the recent collaborative model suggested by Le Cornu (2005).

Experience enabled student mentors to observe both informally and formally the way in which the mentor role was represented and performed in their own and other workshops. For example, Hannah was surprised to see a mentor who was overly analytical and approached each situation in the same way; Gloria observed the group dynamics of mentoring which acted as a constraining force in her own role interpretation and Alice was interested in observing the tensions in other mentor groups. These findings resonate with Ford's (in Hall, 2003) and Clutterbuck's (in Brockbank, 2006) suggestion that there are a range of mentoring models.

Journaling for all of the students was a useful means of reflecting on their experiences and of interpreting and reinterpreting these experiences in the light of their ongoing mentor experiences. For Hannah the journal was a way of reflecting on the way in which she related to other mentors, Gloria traced her development as a mentor and Alice regarded journaling as a way of examining her interpretation of the mentor role.

The theoretical knowledge encountered in the academic seminars represented "knowledge about" mentoring and teaching. The application of this theory to practice through reflection ensured the development of "knowledge of" practice. The theoretical component of the course was used in different ways by the participants to understand their practice. For example, phenomenological sociology as a way of understanding mentoring appealed to Hannah. It was the concept of the 'life-world' that was useful because it enabled her to isolate the teaching and mentoring roles. Gloria did not identify specific theories but rather the whole theoretical tenor of the programme which she found to be potentially more professionally useful than an emphasis on classroom strategies along.

Identity formation had the most profound impact on Alice. She reflected on her own identity formation as teacher and mentor and also on the identity formation of her students. What is evident

in student responses to theory is that the concurrent presentation of theory and its active use in practice encourages students to engage with theory as a way of better understanding their practice. What the programme has begun to achieve is the integration of theory and practice so that formal and explicit knowledge is seen as useful in situated practice. This Leinhardt, McCarthy Young and Merriman (1995) argue begins the creation of a landscape of professional knowledge. That is, in the programme student mentors begin “theorizing practice and particularizing theory” (Leinhardt et al, 1995, p. 404).

The mentoring experience enabled student mentors to develop, through their reflections on these experiences, what Le Cornu (2005, p. 359) refers to as “a mentoring attitude”. That is, student mentors grew to value their own learning and the learning of others. This reflective capacity is critical to mentoring for it provides professional support by challenging ideas and beliefs (Le Cornu, 2005, p. 361). Overall, the impact of these reflected experiences was to expand students’ conceptualisation of the mentoring role.

There is an extensive mentor literature which has largely focused on the benefits of mentoring for mentees. The research findings examined here provide insight into the less well researched impact of mentoring on mentors. In the context of preservice teacher education the findings indicate that preservice professional experience as mentors constitutes a significant element in developing student mentors’ conceptualisations of professional practice.

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