



Repositioning mentoring as educative: Examining missed opportunities for professional learning



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Mentoring student teachers has potential to be an opportunity for teacher learning.
- Teachers saw mentoring as distinct from professional learning.
- Educative mentoring provides a framework for viewing reciprocal learning opportunities through mentoring.

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1. Introduction: Educative mentoring and professional learning in the New Zealand landscape

Teacher professional learning manifests in various ways (Kennedy, 2005), but enhancing teaching and learning comprise the driving focus (Avalos, 2011). We privilege the term professional learning over professional development, where we position professional learning as “continuing, active, social, and related to practice” (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 703). Professional development, on the other hand, has connotations of teacher deficits that need to be corrected (Kennedy, 2005). We believe that there are potential learning opportunities in socially situated work with others such as mentoring when viewed from a professional learning perspective. While mentor teachers are not required to learn from the mentoring relationship, in this paper we argue that if mentors of preservice teachers adopt an educative mentoring stance, they are more likely to be able to reap the benefits of professional learning from the mentoring relationship.

Briefly, educative mentoring is a conception of mentoring which features reciprocity, collaboration and openness in the mentoring

relationship (Schwille, 2008). This (re)positioning shifts mentor teachers away from the role of expert to a stance of inquiring into teaching and learning in collaboration with the student teacher. Educative mentoring can support professional learning when mentors position themselves as co-learners in the mentor-mentee relationship (Trevethan, 2017).

A current emphasis on “evidence informed inquiry” (Sinnema, Sewell, & Milligan, 2011, p. 247) as a way to improve teaching and learning is evident in the most recent changes to professional learning in New Zealand. Teachers, alone and together, are encouraged to inquire into their practices with a view to improving and transforming their teaching (Lieberman & Miller, 2011). In this context, professional learning can be viewed as a process of investigating and trialling different approaches to practice. When professional learning is conceptualised in this way, mentoring student teachers could be a catalyst for new learning for teachers (Arnold, 2002; Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Hudson, 2013; Minott & Willett, 2011; Torrez & Krebs, 2012). This is a tantalising prospect, especially in light of changes to the professional learning environment in New Zealand.

Traditionally much of the professional learning for teachers in New Zealand was managed nationally and provided by the Ministry of Education funded School Support Service (Sankar & Chauvel, 2010). Specialist advisers would go to primary schools on request to give support and guidance. Since 2011, local providers have been replaced by large Ministry of Education funded consortia and some private providers (Whatman & Bull, 2014). The latest professional learning focus has been on raising student achievement in mathematics, science, reading, writing and digital fluency (Education Services, 2017). Changes in the provision and type of professional learning available may make it more difficult for teachers to access external support to meet their individual learning needs in future, particularly in areas outside of those currently prioritised by the government. In light of the changing professional learning and

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development landscape in New Zealand it is timely to investigate alternative ways of supporting teacher learning.

Langdon (2014), writing in the context of mentoring beginning teachers, suggests that there is limited understanding of how mentoring affects mentor learning. This is also true of mentoring in initial teacher education where there are conflicting views about potential gains for mentor teachers (Simpson, Hastings, & Hill, 2007). In an endeavour to better understand teachers' experiences of professional learning from mentoring, this paper explores the research question: *To what extent do mentor teachers recognise mentoring student teachers as an opportunity for professional learning?*

In the sections that follow we examine the research literature connecting mentoring with teacher learning, and explore the relevance of a community of practice model of professional learning to think about mentoring. Next we describe the study and then present teachers' experiences of professional learning and mentoring, before considering to what degree professional learning opportunities were recognised by these teachers. We then explore the implications for mentors and schools. We argue teachers can capitalise on the professional learning opportunities available through mentoring when they reposition themselves as educative mentors.

2. Mentoring and professional learning

Many mentors find mentoring a rewarding experience. Mentors can gain new perspectives and new ideas from mentees (Gilles & Wilson, 2004). Mentees can also support mentor learning by sharing new ideas and educational theories with mentors (Gilles & Wilson, 2004). Simpson et al. (2007) listed positive outcomes for mentors as personal, technical, and professional. At a personal level, the presence of a student teacher can provide positive affirmation for a teacher. Student teachers can also be the reason for an increase in teachers' sense of commitment to the profession, and a source of renewed energy to continue to develop their practices (Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Jaspers, Meijer, Prins, & Wubbels, 2014). Technical rewards come from teachers being introduced to new ideas and resources by student teachers, which may be incorporated into their teaching (Hudson, 2013; Simpson et al., 2007). Bradbury and Koballa (2007) provide an example where a mentee was able to share their skill with technology to enhance mentor teaching. Professionally, an extra pair of hands in the classroom can allow teachers to work with smaller groups. Teachers also report taking more care in planning, being more organized, and having heightened awareness of what they do because of the presence of a student teacher (Arnold, 2002; Torrez & Krebs, 2012).

In addition, studies frequently report that the presence of a student teacher stimulates mentor teacher reflection. 70% of the participants in a Hong Kong study of 259 teachers reported that being a mentor had been beneficial for them due to self-reflection and a desire to demonstrate good practice for student teachers (Lopez-Real & Kwan, 2005). Granted, reflection is important for professional learning; however learning and reflection are not synonymous concepts (Day, 1993). Reflection is only one of many conditions for learning (Hoban, 2002). Teacher learning is a complex system where the teacher, the school and the learning activity are all important (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). We position teacher professional learning as something deeper than simply reflection, and more likely to alter teacher actions and thinking over time.

The mentoring relationship can provide professional learning opportunities for both mentor and mentee (Giebelhaus & Bowman 2002; Hudson, 2010). We view professional learning as "a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social

practice" (Lave, 1991, p. 64). Mentor teachers may be able to take advantage of the opportunities created for professional learning when they abandon the expert-novice model and view mentoring as a social, collaborative endeavour where all member of the community have opportunities to learn (Trevethan, 2017).

Professional learning can be theorised as a collaborative, situated activity, and the same is true for mentoring (Schwille, 2008). The structure of mentoring relationships defines the style of mentoring. When the mentor and mentee are both co-learners within a school learning community, there are opportunities for professional learning through relationships within communities of practice (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012). Ferrier-Kerr (2009) suggests that mentoring relationships should be developed carefully and that they require "reciprocal commitment to each other's development and professional learning" (p. 790).

2.1. Educative mentoring

The complexities of professional learning for mentor teachers are highlighted through the educative mentoring model (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Educative mentoring positions the role of mentor as more than emotional support, giving feedback and helping with resourcing. Implicit in educative mentoring is an expectation that professional experience in schools should provide opportunities for collaborative inquiry, testing new ideas, and professional conversations (Schulz, 2005). The educative mentor role requires teachers to be able to share their thinking and help student teachers to learn how to examine their own teaching in order to improve their teaching and children's learning (Kane & Broadley, 2005; Timperley, 2001). Educative mentoring thrives in a setting where critical reflection is encouraged and teaching is seen as a process of inquiry (Langdon & Ward, 2015). When teachers and student teachers inquire into teaching and learning together in an open and trusting way there are genuine learning opportunities for both parties (Simpson et al., 2007). In other words, educative mentoring is consistent with a community of practice framework (Wenger, 1998).

3. Community of practice

The proposition of a community of practice is predicated on a view of learning as social and situated (Mclaughlin, 2003). From a sociocultural perspective, learning and knowing are made up of learning as belonging, learning as becoming, learning as doing and learning as experience. Wenger (1998) uses these ideas as an entry point for exploration of the term "community of practice", which provides a useful way of looking at professional learning as it relates to mentor teachers.

Community of practice is a generic term and communities of practice are not defined by size, location, membership, or longevity (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) define a community of practice as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour ... practices emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour" (p. 464). In a community of practice, learning is a process of learning the culture and moving into a community (Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter, 2006) where experiences and ideas are exchanged (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). One might view the mentor-mentee setting as a community of practice in itself, or as a place where student teachers negotiate entry to a school community of practice, or to the teaching community as a whole.

Social engagement is integral to the notion of communities of practice. Wenger (1998) suggests that the social and the learning aspects of these groups are inextricably linked. Members are often diverse in degrees of expertise and are brought together by a shared

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