Subject Specialist Mentors in the Lifelong Learning Sector: who needs them? A case study approach

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Abstract

Mentoring has become a key to success in many fields and different organisations, and has now become one of the important roles within Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS). The training of mentors, in particular, Subject Specialist Mentors (SSMs), is therefore fundamental to make sure that trainees on ITT courses develop with regard to teaching and ensuring they have the necessary subject knowledge. Research was based on a case study at the University Campus Barnsley (part of the University of Huddersfield). Findings from SSMs, through focus groups, through trainees on a Certificate in Education/Professional or Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Cert Ed/PGCE) ITT course as well as through questionnaires highlighted some interesting development needs. The research has found that there is a changing profile of the SSM who supports trainees on ITT courses; in particular they feel that they are not only mentors, but also coaches.

Key words

Mentor; Subject Specialist Mentor; Initial Teacher Training; Coach; Lifelong Learning Sector.

Introduction

This article considers the role of the Subject Specialist Mentor and the impact they have on trainee teachers undertaking a Certificate in Education/Professional or Postgraduate Certificate in Education to teach in the LLS. The research is based on a case study approach conducted at the University Campus Barnsley, part of the University of Huddersfield, between 2007 and 2009. The article draws attention to the importance of Lifelong Learning trainee teachers having the support of a SSM. Although the subject of mentoring has been studied for many years, research into SSMs within the LLS has been minimal. The diversity of the subject specialisms within the sector is not exhaustive and therefore the support for mentors is imperative. This article therefore sets the stage for an introduction to developing a more extensive training programme to support the SSM within the sector.

Mentoring and the role of the Subject Specialist Mentor

According to Bailey et al (2010), mentoring may be seen as a 'protected' relationship (Collins, 1979; Trovey and Blamires, 2006) that aims to develop the mentee from apprenticeship to independence. It places particular emphasis on being friendly and approachable in order to build rapport and encourage reflection from the mentee. It emphasises the importance of listening actively and questioning appropriately, whilst offering the right amount of challenge and support to the mentee. Iredale and Schoch (2010) offer an interesting and concise definition of how they see the role of the mentor and discuss the fact that part of the role is to encourage trainees to challenge assumptions. Achinstein and Athanases (2005) also state that trainees should be encouraged to question beliefs and assumptions and not just to accept. Halai (2006) found that the process of mentoring was described in roles, for example, the role of guide, support worker and information giver. However, she outlined that there is the role that involves emotional support and guidance that seems to be implicit in the role of a mentor and the importance of a veteran teacher who understands the needs of the students they teach (Achinstein and Athanases, 2005).

Although the above skills and aptitudes are essential for mentors, so too is the importance of subject knowledge. Several authors have considered the role of the subject mentor and their significance to ITT in the secondary sector. Capel gives an interesting insight into the role which is *'…usually concerned with developing students' subject knowledge, skills and application'* (2003: p. 133). Both Williams (1993) and Tinning (1996) stress the importance of subject mentors in supporting and helping students to reach appropriate standards and competencies within their subject specialism. Rothera et al (1991) also make a useful observation about the role of subject mentoring:

> *'…in subject mentoring a crucial difference must be appreciated between technical expertise and process, since the mentor's repertoire of knowledge, attitudes and skills encompasses both esoteric subject matter content on the one hand, and teaching and learning method on the other hand. In other words the "subject mentor" plays the complementary roles of subject matter specialist and education consultant.'*

> (1991: p. 126)

Their research also considered why subject mentors were valued by trainees, and often a trainee will seek out a mentor that they feel will support them more than the one the organisation may have assigned (Savory and Glasson 2009). In some instances the trainee can become the 'protégé' of the mentor (Clutterbuck, 2004), a subject specialist protégé, in which case the need for a SSM becomes more important. Issues that include guidance on subject-related problems, technical experience, awareness of developments in subject knowledge and the ability to suggest more appropriate teaching methods

were cited as being particularly useful. Likewise the course member and subject mentor *'speak the same language [and]…there is an opportunity for subject member and course member to share knowledge and experience'* (Rothera et al, 1991: p. 131)

The importance of appropriate support for subject specialist development was reviewed by Ofsted (2003) and they stated that the majority of ITT courses did not include subject specialist pedagogy to ensure that teachers had the specific skills and knowledge they need to teach their subjects. In considering Ofsted's point, Cunningham (2005) argued that it was not hard to accept that a trainee would have aspirations to be mentored by someone whose expertise closely matched their own. He argued that trainees were not well served by mentors who were wholly generic, and who failed to recognise the needs of trainees for clear and expert guidance on the way in which to approach the specific challenges of teaching their own specific subject.

The views of Ofsted were accepted by the Government in *Equipping Our Teachers for the Future*, where they stated that:
> *'Subject-specific skills must be acquired in the teachers' workplace and from vocational or academic experience. Mentoring, either by line managers, subject experts or experienced teachers in related curriculum areas is essential'.*
>
> (DfES, 2004: p. 8)

Several authors (Keeley-Brown, 2007; Halai, 2006; Hankey, 2004) have discussed the importance of SSM to trainee teachers. Hankey discussed how mentors who were subject specialists in the same subject as the trainee teacher were often reported as being especially helpful. In particular SSMs were seen as: *'…knowing how to pitch a subject at the appropriate level for different groups of learners, and having ready questions, examples and anecdotes'* (Hankey, 2004: p. 394). She argued that these are all aspects of professional practice that novice teachers find problematic which is precisely where a good mentor can provide advice and subject specialist resources. Similarly, Keeley-Brown (2007) asserts that the SSM role is an important one and that mentors should be qualified and experienced subject specialist teachers who are prepared to spend time with trainees taking responsibility for their professional development.
> *'Trainee teachers at this novice stage of development are disposed to focus mainly on acquiring the skills and knowledge that they perceive expert teachers to possess, rather than focussing on the complex process of their students' learning.'*
>
> (Hankey, 2004: p. 394)

Interestingly Halai (2006) discusses the fact that although most mentors begin supporting their mentees with the generic teaching skills, subject specific skills become more evident throughout mentor/mentee interactions, and that the mentors are actually expected to have this specific knowledge to enable them to support their mentees.

Bullough et al (2008) make a useful point when considering the match between mentor and mentee: *'Making successful matches between mentors and mentees is complicated and frequently appears to involve as much luck as good planning'* (2008: p. 1846). However, the difficulties in finding a suitable SSM for all trainees should not undermine the importance of having a good mentor/trainee relationship even if the subject specialism is limited (Savory and Glasson, 2009; Wallace and Gravells, 2007). Cunningham (2005) discusses the needs of the trainees within the organisation which may seem basic, but nevertheless necessary, such as knowing where and how to photocopy, keys to classrooms, and being shown around the organisation. It is difficult to function as a teacher on a day-to-day basis without knowing the basics. According to Kyriacou and Kunc (2007) it is essential to have support from mentors and other staff in the organisation, and in turn this has a direct impact on the trainees' retention on the ITT course, which may also impact on their teaching role.

Methodology
A case study was utilised for the research to explore issues associated with the SSM in a focused manner (Gray, 2009). This approach allowed the role of the SSM to be explored from the point of view of both mentors and trainees, and permitted relationships and ambiguities to be uncovered in relation to the SSM role. Gray (2004: p. 124) makes an interesting observation about a case study approach, which *'…is particularly useful when the researcher is trying to uncover a relationship between a phenomenon and the context in which it occurs.'*

Two main methods of collecting information were used: focus groups for the mentors and questionnaires for the trainees. The focus groups were a useful method of research as they enabled information to be collected that was framed around the role of, and importance of, the SSM. The use of focus groups allowed for interaction between the participants during the focus group as they had the ability to observe the feelings and reactions of other participants (Greenbaum, 2000). This allowed for rich detailed data to be collected and enabled a variety of views to emerge from the group interviews. Focus groups are also based on the assumption that people will talk, not only about the topics they are instructed to, but also any problems when they are in a group of similarly concerned people (Dillon and Barclay, 1997). In particular the focus group considered issues relating to the role of a SSM and why the role was important to both trainees and mentors.

Using questionnaires to collect information from trainees had some inherent advantages. These included the fact that they are low cost in terms of time, the inflow of data was quick and detailed and trainees were able to fill in the questionnaire during a Cert Ed/PGCE class (Gillham, 2000). It was thought that this would give a consistent view as all trainees should have had some experiences to discuss from meetings with their mentors. Although questionnaires can be intrusive and

respondents may want to create a certain impression of themselves (Lee, 2000), the trainees had gained trust from their teacher educators to complete these honestly.

Findings

Common themes (trainees)

Trainees had some interesting points of view when considering what the role of the SSM involved and what skills they would expect their SSM to possess. Not unsurprisingly a large majority of trainees expected their mentor to be a specialist with current subject knowledge and to be *"a guide on subject specialist issues"*. Trainees also emphasised the importance of the SSM offering support, advice and guidance to mentees and being able to build rapport easily. Other important roles/skills included the SSM being someone who actively listened and someone who offered constructive feedback. Some mentees made reference to the importance of a mentor being friendly and approachable and being someone who offered their own critical incidents and shared their experience as a development tool.

Mentees also wanted a mentor to be a role model who sometimes coached. Coaching is often seen as acquiring 'skills' and is related to performance (Sparrow, 2008; Jones et al, 2008) and trainees, mainly at the start of their ITT course, required a mentor to act in a coaching role. Coaching can also take place with regard to the basic needs of trainees, but mentoring is seen as more supporting the experiences of trainees and empathising with the trainee. It is interesting to note that the trainees stated that they required a mentor, but expected the mentor at times to coach.

Trainees were asked to consider how their SSM had helped them whilst they were undertaking their teaching qualification. Initially, the majority of trainees considered generic mentoring skills, and outlined how their SSM offered support, advice and guidance around areas such as course issues, observations, classroom management and lesson planning. Reference was made to the encouragement and praise offered to help develop their confidence. Trainees quickly began to discuss how their SSM had helped them with subject specialist issues. Common themes included sharing their experiences on topics such as teaching strategies and teaching resources, whilst using subject specialist terminology that was accessible, clear and simple. Trainees also discussed the value of sharing experiences and empathising regarding undertaking the CertEd/PGCE and the importance of team teaching with their mentors as part of their development. They were pleased with how their SSM had helped them link theory and practice, for instance when reflecting on their teaching sessions the mentors helped trainees link to appropriate models of reflection. Finally, trainees stated how the mentor had helped them to develop their subject specialist skills and to teach their subject more creatively.

Common themes (mentors)

The focus groups uncovered some interesting and useful information in regard to how mentors saw the role of, and importance of the SSM. They also included some useful information regarding future training needs. The SSM outlined the benefits of regular support for the mentee, particularly away from any distractions that their working environment might offer. The regular meetings that were arranged and timetabled contributed to being able to build rapport between the SSM and the confidence of the mentee. Mentors were happy offering support, advice and guidance around subject specialist pedagogical issues, and they discussed the importance of challenging trainees as they developed in their role. However, they expressed concern around the concept of challenge, when to challenge and how much challenge to give a trainee.

Several mentors commented on the mentor/trainee meetings being themed around the areas of the course that the trainees need to consider, for example, resources, classroom management, evaluation etc. Interestingly all members of the focus groups made reference to their role involving helping their trainee feel part of the institution. Particular reference was made to making them aware of bureaucratic institutional issues and, *"...giving them a heads up about the culture of the place"*.

The training of mentors was considered in some detail with the majority of mentors expressing a desire to have additional training in the role, both with regards to improving their coaching and mentoring skills, and also their specific role as a trainee teacher's mentor. They wanted support in the practicalities of carrying out observations, completing paperwork, and not only supporting their trainees through empathy and understanding, but setting them targets in order that they perform well in the classroom (coaching). Mentors were also keen to be put in touch with other SSM in order to share good practice and network, and hopeful that the mentors were also keen that the mentor/trainee relationship continue once the trainee completed their ITT course.

One of the suggestions from several mentors was that trainees were also invited to the mentor forums as it was felt that the discussion from the experiences from both mentors and trainees would be significant. They thought it would also improve the relationship between the mentors and trainees.

Recommendations

In response to the issues raised at the mentor forums and the comments from the trainees' questionnaires the following recommendations have been made which involve some further training for the mentors.

The following support mechanisms, including workshops, have been designed as a result of and are based on supporting the skills of SSMs with regard to carrying out mentor observations:

1. Enhancing Subject Specialist Mentoring Skills training will provide mentors with the opportunity to develop observation and feedback skills. The purpose of the training is to better equip SSMs in supporting trainees in their subject specialist pedagogy. It will consider issues around challenge, subject specialist coaching, qualities of effective mentors and the importance of empathy within mentoring relationships

2. A Professional Formation workshop has been scheduled for mentors which will not only support the mentors if they decide to apply for QTLS, but they would also be able support their trainees in their Professional Formation year as mentors want their role to continue after the trainee has achieved their teaching qualification. There is also the need, clarified by mentors, to give further information with regard to elements of the taught course to better prepare them to help their trainees as necessary.

3. Creation of a social networking site that all mentors can use. This would initially house all the relevant documentation for the trainees on the University of Huddersfield ITT PCET course. It would also have links to relevant useful websites. The social network site will allow synchronous communication between mentors.

Conclusion
Mentoring, preparing and supporting trainee teachers, both in-service and pre-service is extremely important and mentor training and courses can be linked to the needs of diverse trainees. It is important to develop mentor training to ensure that mentors not only understand the importance of their role, but to become agents of change and not local guides and to encourage the trainees to challenge certain beliefs and not just accept (Achinstein and Athanases, 2005).
> *'…it is clear…that the relationship between the mentor and mentee is vital to an effective mentoring experience.'*
>
> (Savory and Glasson, 2009: p. 36)

It has also become clear that mentors see the need to coach at times, certainly with regard to setting targets and assessing the trainees' performance in the classroom. They are, however, particularly keen to become a supportive and empathetic mentor. The skills of coaching that the mentor may use are also very useful to the trainee when they need to be given ideas, be shown new skills and be assessed carrying out their teaching. There are many similarities between coaching and mentoring (Clutterbuck, 2004; Wallace and Gravells, 2007; Iredale and Schoch, 2010), therefore the mentor role for ITT should incorporate the role of coach. Mentor training should be developmental over a period of time, starting with coaching skills such as showing the trainee the basic skills, setting targets and assessing teaching observations, and moving on to more supportive skills such as questioning, listening and encouragement. Mentors should always be open minded, non-judgemental, have the ability to build a good rapport with their trainee and maintain trust and confidentiality (Bailey et al, 2010). These concur with some of the comment from the trainees' questionnaires:
> *"…the role of the SSM involves supporting and giving constructive feedback. They should be approachable and available with a sound knowledge around teacher training issues"*
>
> *"…the role of the SSM involves giving constructive feedback, being accessible and knowledgeable in both subject and practice"*
>
> *"…the role of the SSM involves demonstrating good practice in the classroom themselves and telling the trainee what they could do better"*
>
> *"…the role of the SSM involves helping the trainee to develop their teaching skills so they can become a better teacher"*

After considering the skills associated with a mentor and a subject mentor, and in light of the mentor focus groups and the trainee questionnaire we offer the following SSM model:

Figure 1: SSM model
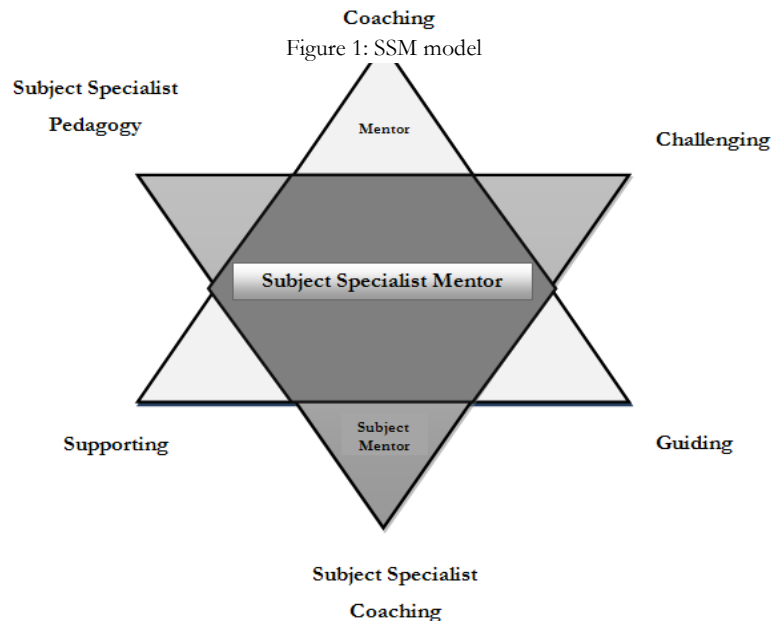
Throughout the lifetime of the mentor/trainee relationship, a SSM should consider each of the model's six points, whether they are coaching the trainee using a subject specialist resource or discussing issues around classroom management. There will be times when the SSM will offer the trainee challenges to enhance their development as a teacher or subject specialist. The mentor will also guide the trainee through working within the organisation and also help guide them with subject specialist pedagogy. Support should be inherent throughout the relationship, however, rapport and more empathetic skills will be constantly developed.

This research additionally raises questions around the role of the SSM:

- Who mentors the mentors?
- Who trains the mentors?
- How do we ensure that all mentors have the basic training?
- Should mentors have a mentor qualification?

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