Mentoring teacher trainees in times of COVID-19: reflection on practice

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The pandemic of Coronavirus in 2020-21 (COVID-19) has impacted upon the lives of many university-based school mentors and teacher trainees. The strong commitment and partnership between mentors, trainees and training settings has, despite such challenges, allowed teacher training to continue and flourish. This has been achieved through relentless innovation and change so that schools, mentors, course leaders and training institutions can continue to support their trainees. Using virtual support for trainees in schools, coupled with a strong school training partnership which is staffed by committed mentors this has meant that trainees continue to progress towards their goal of achieving qualified teacher status. Personal relationships between mentors and trainees have underpinned trainees' emotional, personal and professional wellbeing. This reflective paper, written by a university-based teacher training mentor, outlines how change has been managed, and the factors that have secured success in these most turbulent of times.

Key words; mentoring, primary education, teacher training, reflective practice, COVID-19.

Introduction

COVID-19 has had a global impact not only on the daily and strategic lives of schools and universities (Harris 2020; Wintachai et al. 2020) but also on the work of school experience tutors and mentors such as myself. From my perspective such cause and effect clearly resonate with and has links to the bioecological model such as that of Bronfenbrenner's (1979). Where external influences placed on society and its leaders, in this case the pandemic, at what is described as the 'macro system', can influence myself, schools and teacher trainees in terms of our development and relationships at the 'micro-system' level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22). Trainee teachers who have been, or are currently, on their journey to qualified teacher status cannot help being caught up in the whole scale disruption caused by this pandemic. So, what has been learned over these preceding months? This article wishes to explore what that has allowed mentors and initial teacher training (ITT)

providers to continue to provide high quality training and support despite such unpreceded times of change.

Purpose of this paper

These reflections are from the author's personal perspective as a university-based school mentor or what is sometimes referred to as a link tutor. The reflective observations cover the period from March 2020 to January 2021, and relate to the author's school-based mentoring of post-graduate trainees on a primary initial training school direct pathway. This article reflects upon and relates to three themes; the need for innovation and change, the role of personal relationships, and the use of remote technological support in order to support change.

The need for change

As an observer of this crisis, innovation and change has proved vital in supporting trainees not only to access placements in schools' but also for course leaders, university training courses, and mentors like myself to adapt to the profound changes to this new educational, political and societal landscape. COVID-19, if nothing else, has inadvertently forced us to revisit our traditional deeply held views about training and challenged us to think creatively so that we may survive and thrive in this new landscape. This pandemic has allowed us to open our minds to non-traditional routines and practices to our support trainees and their teaching, it has allowed us be enablers and not blockers.

With what has become the innovative and necessary mix of virtual and face to face teaching experiences ITT providers can still continue to train the next generation of teachers and trainees to teach. All of these varied experiences will no doubt help trainees to prepare for what will be an uncertain landscape of teaching, where an adaptive pedagogy will be needed to fit the times in which they will find themselves.

ITT has been supported by limited guidance from the Department for Education (DfE), with documents such as DfE (2020) seeking to support training providers with ideas and guidance on adapting the process of teacher training to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic. These include for example, waiving the previous requirement for 120 days of school experience if school-based training courses have been disrupted by COVID-19. Having heard of many innovative approaches and adaptations by training providers, rather than us all seeking to reinvent the wheel surely there is a need now for the capturing and dissemination of the most successful and innovative of approaches used to support our trainees during these times. Through the publication of exemplar case studies, it would allow individual institutions to share the current good practice of others whilst in turn providing some means to promote a consistency of good practice and training message for the future.

Relationships are key

The long-established and close personal working relationships and bonds which have always been forged between ITT providers, schools, trainees and their mentors have now proved the bedrock to a trainee's success in meeting the DfE (2013) during this pandemic. I have found that a virtual relationship has by necessity evolved making formal visits to settings, by tutors like myself, seem a thing of the past. My distancing from face-to-face visits and the chance to be part of what Wenger (2000) might suggest is a social learning situation and a community of professional practice has now changed. Although this is not to say that all my core duties have changed beyond recognition. For example, as a mentor my practice still includes the provision of 'professional knowledge' and 'technical support' in order for me to help my students develop their own ability to teach (Izadinia 2016, p.389). With such a relationship inevitably involving the development of a 'close emotional connection' between a trainee and their mentor (Izadinia, 2016, p.399).

What has changed most markedly for me, despite the many virtual or phone contacts between myself and my trainees, is the creeping sense of what I now realise is that of my own personal isolation. Though these feelings have to some extent been compensated by the development of a strong personal bond between myself and my trainees in response to the situation we now find ourselves in this in no way makes up for a face-to-face meeting. My own personal bonds now I feel have been amplified given my desire to support trainees to thrive and succeed whilst on placement whatever they will face. This amplification has meant a need in me to maximise my efforts into knowing and supporting my trainees, through much more regular virtual, or telephone, contact. To check in with them to see if things are alright in order to support their professional and personal wellbeing given the issues they are facing. My remit has grown much wider nowadays from that of class-based practice, for example the need for me to help trainees deal with day-to-day issues thrown up by this crisis and the COVID-19 tier requirements are a plenty.

My own feelings of isolation also extend far beyond the mentor's and trainee's relationship but also to that between myself and my peers. What is now missing, for me, is day to day on the ground contact with my training peers to discuss items or matters relating to training. Those quick discussion in the corridor which solved many issues now become an appointment on a virtual platform, a dialogue through email or by 'phoning a friend'; however, what is missing is that human contact that oils the wheels of doing. Though many opportunities are provided to support a feeling of wholeness - for example, regular 'drop ins for mentors' - it must be acknowledged that not seeing anyone in person has had the effect of reinforcing, for me, my own personal sense of isolation. Where good times could be shared and problems discussed.

Despite what might seem a bleak picture for trainees, mentors and training one thing that has taken root is a developing sense of emotional resilience and, with this, the ability to

'bounce back' when faced with life's challenges (Grant and Kinman, 2015, p.24). Through our constant support of trainees, no matter what the difficulties encountered, emotional resilience has been fostered. For example, providing trainees with opportunities to discuss their practice and emotional reactions to situations, ultimately helping them to develop a varied stock of problem solving and coping mechanisms (Grant and Kinman, 2015, p. 27). One thing this pandemic has shown us is we are all in it together and for some items there are not quick or easy solutions. For trainees such a life lesson has driven a realisation in them that though times get tough and that we as mentors can provide strategies and suggestions to help in situations it is down to their own determination to succeed that will make the difference. Such a need within trainees to be emotionally resilience must surely now be seen as one of the key protective attributes for trainees to survive and thrive whatever change may throw at them. A key message for training in the future must surely now be the need for mentors and trainees to work together to develop strong relationships, a sense of community and belonging and an ability to be resilient in order to help counter the inevitable change that this pandemic will continue to throw at us.

The role of technology

One thing that COVID-19 has not diminished is the need for mentors and their trainees to have meaningful dialogues and conversations regarding a trainee's professional practice in order to review their professional progress. Such an item has to a large extent has been allowed to continue by allowing mentors virtual access to our trainees. This speed of change to the use of such an online platform was driven, as Zhou & Wolstencroft (2020) rightly suggest, by a desire to ensure the student experience was not compromised. Though unfortunately as they note it was underpinned by some, such as myself, who lacked both confidence and skills in the use such a range of technology.

Unlike the digital divide that emerged with regards to pupils' access to technology to support home study (Harris, 2020), trainees, from my experience at least were well equipped with computers or tablets to quickly access virtual platforms. Though a population variation may occur in student's abilities to use and access technology, for many students, I have found it is the historic use and digital demands placed on them by university courses to access virtual learning platforms and their own personal use of items such as social media which has meant a familiarity and ability to access to such technology. However one thing that must be forgotten, is as Zhou & Wolstencroft (2020) state, students skills using items such as social media may lead to greater levels of confidence when utilising online materials though this may not be predicted or reflected in their digital literacy.

Though I found that trainees could quickly adapt to this use of a virtual experience for support, the biggest challenge with regards to this virtual existence - that was faced by many mentors, like myself - was having to quickly become digitally upskilled in order to match the technological changes needed to support trainees and successfully carry out a mentor's traditional practices such as assessment and feedback. From my experience, I found it reassuring to know that individual's such as myself were not alone in having such as digital shortfall with regards to the technology, knowledge and skill levels needed to adapt to such a new existence. Many of my peers also similarly found such a sudden need to upskill challenging. As with the areas of knowledge for individual's use of technology as outlined by Koehler and Mishra (2005 p.133) i.e., that of 'Technology, Pedagogy and Content', it seemed clear to me that content or subject matter (the content knowledge) linked to the practices of being a mentor remained to some extent fairly constant. However, what had now changed was a consideration of what were the most effective strategies to use when using technology to promote effective mentoring, as well as what was the most appropriate technology to use to secure the best outcomes for trainees (both my pedagogical and technological knowledge).

However, reflecting back of such issues, it would seem clear to me now that the need for sudden change did bring about many benefits. This includes, a great deal of technological knowledge and experience wrought from necessity, for example, my ability to use video-conferencing software as developed immensely alongside that of my confidence and competent levels in its use.

Given this fluctuation in both lecturers and students digital literacy skills levels over this recent period it is important that individuals do not solely rely on each other to guide and support them through these new virtual times. Though time has been short to establish this virtual change of provision it is important now that opportunities continue to be given over to train and support individuals in raising their overall levels of digital literacy. This will not only aid the use of any such future platforms but also take the burden away from individuals in terms of their fears and apprehensions when using such items. However, for individuals such as myself, I do wonder if despite such access to training whether the best driver for engagement will be found in a situation of necessity.

Alongside the use of digital platforms to support dialogue and assessment of trainee's institutions and departments have used remote observation and recording of lessons to supplement school visits. Researchers such as Liang (2015) and MacMahon (2019) have indicated the benefits of live technology in supporting the professional learning and the observation of students whilst on placement. This virtual approach, has in my opinion, brought its own benefits and challenges. These include items such as not seeing a whole field of vision when observing the practice being observed. Though it is beneficial to see the trainee in action such limits do make it hard to observe those out of sight and their interaction with the lesson. This can make feedback on classroom organisation at times problematic. For some children it can also bring changes to their behaviour, good or bad, given the spotlight being thrown on them. It also goes without saying that remote observations have their own

limitations given child protection and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) considerations (Van Boxtel, 2017; MacMahon, 2019) when seeking to observe and record such images.

However, despite such drawback's benefits are a plenty. I have found such a practice has freed-up time spent hitherto travelling to destinations. This can now be used for a more profitable use of time, for example marking and tutorial support. Virtual observations have allowed mentors such as myself a chance to give focused feedback for trainees, and the opportunity for more detailed scrutiny of revisited elements of their taught lesson. This has the benefit of stopping the lesson at any point to aid the trainee's reflection on what they are doing and to offer up developmental advice. Virtual recording of lessons can also have the benefit of building up of a bank of virtual practice-based exemplars which will, no doubt, allow future trainees to see a wide range of excellent, and less impressive, practice. From my own knowledge of institution's practices, live videos have also been used to observe class-based mentors feeding back to trainees. This has the added benefit now and in the future of enabling a wide range of quality assurance practices, between university and their partner settings. This has the potential for such practice in the future to be used to drive up the quality of mentoring offered by school settings and ITT providers.

Concluding remarks

This article's reflections must be considered against the backdrop of trainees, mentors and ITT settings who are on a journey and beset by challenges created by COVID-19. A 'culture of change' (Fullan 2000) has been needed to allow this community of practice and teacher training to survive and thrive. This pandemic has forced leaders and individuals to critically assess and then decide on the ideas and practices that will best needed in the future.

I now realise change is nothing to be feared and when it is forced upon us it allows us to revisit our traditional practices, as they say necessity is the mother of invention. Through the use of remote platforms for trainees, teacher training can still continue and, in fact, does flourish. We must remember when times come, post COVID-19 that we must keep the good from our new practices and integrate them into a new hybridised form of training. But we must also remember at the heart of training is the role of personal relationships and strong partnerships that underpins all we do. Whatever plays out in the future, given what we have faced and learned during this pandemic, we will know we have the ability to produce resilient well trained teaching profession no matter what. These trainees will be well prepared for whatever professional challenges they may face, expected or not. When faced in the future with sudden change, I wonder if I, or others, will too finds strength from knowing the importance of our relationships with others, in knowing we can be adaptive and resilient and how given common ground we can all pull together to thrive in the face of adversity.

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