

Conceptions and Expectations of Mentoring Relationships in a Teacher Education Reform Context

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## Abstract

Research on mentoring indicates that prior experience and beliefs about learning and teaching held by practicing and pre-service teachers contribute significantly in shaping their mentoring relationships and, more broadly, their career outlook and aspirations. While mentoring is commonly seen as a form of support for pre-service teachers, mentoring can be pivotal in the creation of enabling environments in which collaborative, professional dialogues are undertaken. Yet, there lies a tension between enculturation into the norms of schools and promoting self-belief, participation and collaboration. Drawing on a qualitative methodology, this study focuses on the conceptions and expectations of classroom mentoring within the context of a teacher reform initiative in Scotland. Findings indicate that participants in the study held a mixture of beliefs regarding mentoring practices. Implications for partnership arrangements in initial teacher education and teachers' career development were discussed.

Keywords: mentoring; apprenticeship; critical constructivism; realism; beliefs; career development.

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### **Introduction**

Mentoring of beginning teachers is widely recognised as central to the process of teacher education. Through mentoring, beginning teachers are guided to develop knowledge about practices of teaching and they also develop professional identity. Most importantly however, mentoring sits at the interplay of professional expectations, which are culturally and socially framed. In this regard, Bradbury and Koballa Jr. (2008) reported on the key role played by prior experiences and beliefs in shaping teachers' perceptions of their role as mentors as well as of themselves as learners in the process (James & McCormick, 2009; Hudson, 2013). Similarly, student teachers' expectations about learning to become a teacher may influence their expectations about their mentoring relationship (Duit, 1996 in Hobson, 2002). In this context, Wang, Odell, and Schwille (2008) warned against the dangers of developing mentor-centred practices which fail to acknowledge the variety of goals and approaches to learning. In pre-service teacher education in particular, traditional approaches to mentoring have been increasingly criticised for not giving adequate attention to student teachers' needs, and for their limited impact on both career and professional practice (Blasé, 2009).

The field of career development theory can provide insights into alternative approaches for strengthening teacher education and the career development of teachers. The constructivist career development theory (Savickas, 1997; Peavy, 1998) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) in particular offer opportunity for professional learning through interaction, observation and mutual collaboration and may align productively with mentoring as a form of teacher learning. So, revisiting mentoring practices within a framework of collaborative learning aimed at fostering egalitarian professional relationships can yield important promises for teachers' career development. To this aim, the exploration of both teachers' and student teachers' views and practices of mentoring in the classroom is indispensable.

This study was therefore concerned with the conceptions and expectations of teachers and student teachers about collaborative mentoring in a teacher education reform context. In our view, an examination of the

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conceptions and expectations about mentoring practices can raise important questions about the practices guiding teacher education and can raise significant implications for teachers' career development.

### **Background: A Study of Mentoring in the Context of Teacher Education Reform**

This study is derived from a larger study exploring a teacher education reform programme developed in Scotland (United Kingdom) and now nine years on since the first developments were introduced. Stemming from a parallel initiative promoted in the United States (Fallon, 2006), the project was sponsored by the Scottish Government with support from a private foundation and six local authorities with the aim of preparing teachers for the challenges of life and work in the 21st century (Gray & Colucci-Gray, 2010). As part of the reform, a pilot model of teacher education, centred on the design of a new Bachelor of Education programme for prospective primary teachers, was developed. Launched in 2007, the Scottish reform joined a swathe of reform initiatives in teacher education occurring worldwide (Gray & Colucci-Gray, 2010). One of the common aspects of these initiatives affecting teacher education policy internationally has been the emphasis on professionalization; teaching was to become a clinical profession, developed by practitioners holding respect for solid evidence in the diagnosis of learning needs and the exertion of professional judgement (Fallon, 2006).

In parallel with the implementation of the pilot, teacher education programme, a further series of policy initiatives introduced some additional and important changes in Scottish education. The newly launched "Curriculum for Excellence" (CfE), was held up as a platform for spurring creative, innovative and autonomous teaching. Subsequently, a review of teacher education in Scotland" (Donaldson, 2010), followed by the McCormac Review (Scottish Government, 2011) put forward a set of explicit policy guidelines for advancing teacher professionalism. In this scenario it becomes apparent that notions of teacher learning and career development are central to educational change. However, as it was insightfully anticipated by Whitty (2000), the career development of teachers is influenced by competing expectations. For example, under the rising power of an evaluative state, which is pressing teachers and schools to drive pupils' learning towards prescribed outcomes, the values of autonomy, collaboration and reflection are much more difficult to enact. This state of affairs brings

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dramatic repercussions on teachers' morale and teacher's work. So it is important to inquire into the role played by mentoring for teachers' career development under potentially contrasting, professional expectations.

Core to the pilot initiative upon which this study is based was the creation of a continuum of support for beginning teachers from the undergraduate level through to the first two years of teaching in schools. To this end, student teachers were expected to establish mentoring relationships with classroom teachers in contexts of practice. Collaboration was held up as an important principle for learning, with the idea that discussion of experiences in practice was a valuable learning opportunity for beginning teachers. While the project was striving to introduce 'reform', the mentoring of beginning teachers was not a new practice, but covered a wide range of approaches which would almost certainly exist, from acting as teachers in the workplace (Cameron-Jones & O'Hara, 1995) to developing "a sophisticated appreciation of how children learn, and flexible understanding of the substantive and syntactic structure of knowledge" (Furlong, 2000 cited by Hobson, 2002, p. 18).

Crucially, the idea of University tutors and classroom teachers playing complementary roles not only introduced beginning teachers to an extended professional community (Cameron-Jones & O'Hara, 1995) but it also provided a meaningful context for beginning teachers to gain a broader perspective on their professional learning and shape their career development trajectory (Peavy, 1998). Mentoring could provide student teachers with challenge, reinforcement as well as opportunities for bringing innovation into practice which could in turn impact positively on their career development.

Following from these earlier suggestions, the programme sought to introduce alternative opportunities for professional learning consistently with the constructivist theory of career development which allows individuals to mutually organise and create knowledge in real-life context (Peavy, 1998; Savickas, 1997). To this regard, Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory holds that the learning process is characterised by individuals' thoughts and actions but also involves collaborative and mutual endeavours. In turn, individuals can develop self-efficacy and self-esteem to lead change in educational arenas.

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Building on the notion of mentoring as a mutual learning process, our investigation begins with a discussion of the literature on mentoring. By doing this, we aimed to set out a framework which illustrates how alternative conceptions of mentoring can influence people's epistemological beliefs and orientations towards the process of learning to teach.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The concept of mentoring**

Traditionally, mentoring is defined as a process whereby experienced and mature persons provide information, advice and emotional support to novices over a period of time (Larson, 2009; Mullen, 2005). This is consistent with the apprenticeship conception of mentoring as emphasis is placed upon the experience of teachers acting as mentors to student teachers. Arguably, it is the notion of mentoring as apprenticeship which is currently prevailing in initial teacher education (Krull, 2005, Bradbury & Kobbala Jr. 2008). Learning through apprenticeship, and mentoring as a form of apprenticeship, imply that learning to become a teacher happens through exposure to skilful teaching; the supporter teacher draws on his/her experience to support student teachers in the development of relevant professional knowledge and skills (Krull, 2005; Lofstrom & Eisenschmidt, 2009; Bradbury, 2010).

In a similar fashion, mentoring could also be seen as a process of induction or socialisation whereby novice teachers are inducted into the norms and practices of the school and the school system (Rippon & Martin, 2006; Scanlon, 2008). While socialisation is undoubtedly very relevant to teachers' career development, it is also a somewhat restrictive view on teacher learning, which tends to exclude the multiplicity of agencies, languages and cultural influences on learning in 21<sup>st</sup> century societies (Shea, 2002). A model of learning to becoming a teacher that relies on the acquisition of established practices, irrespective of the experiences and subjectivity of the learner, appears not too dissimilar from what Freire (1970) described more generally as integration by conformity, without the opportunity for the learner to make contributions. In this regard, Kafai, Desai, Peppler, Chiu, and Moya (2008, p.193) argued that the apprenticeship approach relies on an implicit notion of 'deficit

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thinking' in mentoring, in that it frames the role of the mentee as a performer within a given context in which he or she has to fit.

More recently, conceptions of mentoring based on the notion of collaborative and egalitarian relationships - whereby experienced and novice teachers operate as partners to build and improve their professional practices - have been proposed (Bradbury, 2010). In this situation, age and experience are not perceived to be the crucial factors as it is the expertise and professional knowledge contributed by both mentor and mentee considered to be important. These views acknowledge the importance of receiving support from another person, as well as individual effort and equal participation in the learning process. More importantly, mentoring from this perspective is distinctively non-hierarchical as mentor and mentee see themselves both as teachers and learners engaged in equitable and discursive interactions (Kafai et al., 2008). Subscribing to an idea of learning as something that cannot be predetermined, Shanks, Robson and Gray (2012) in a study on mentoring during the Induction year, deflected the idea of mentoring as a scheme for setting out homogeneous learning trajectories for beginning teachers; rather they conceived of mentoring as a point of departure for people to engage in conversations, take part in close collaborative working and support the integration of off-the-job learning into everyday practice.

This approach is consistent with views of knowledge and learning stemming from a critical constructivist perspective as indicated by Kincheloe (2005), which is also parallel to the constructivist career development theory (Savickas, 1997). That is, mentoring is aimed at encouraging the active involvement of supporter teachers and student teachers in the production of knowledge and justification of ideas in a collaboratively designed setting. Drawing on the works of Freire (1970), Kincheloe rejects commodified ideas of knowledge; rather, critical constructivism arises from egalitarian structure of relationships as a basis for the creation of knowledge in context. Hence with regard to mentoring, a critical constructivist approach encourages a continuous process of collaborative investigation to better understand teaching and learning needs (Aderibigbe, 2014; Aderibigbe, Colucci-Gray & Gray, 2014; Wang & Odell, 2002). It seems consistent with Freire's philosophical assumption that the most important thing to humans lies in the acquired capability to make an input into things that affect

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them directly (conscientisation). In the case of mentoring however this is not only an individual pursuit but a form of collective praxis rooted into processes of learning amongst teachers and learners. A critical constructivist mentoring process is characterised by joint effort between supporter teachers and student teachers to examine pedagogical knowledge, share ideas, or even, generate new professional knowledge (Aderibigbe, 2014; Aderibigbe et al., 2014). In our view, this can strengthen teachers' professional and career development: professional knowledge and skills are developed alongside personal values and beliefs, thus providing a solid motivational base for teachers to undertake new challenges in the education profession.

The enactment of mentoring processes informed by egalitarian principles however may be challenging to existing power relations. Siry (2011) explains that competing priorities may challenge collaborative mentoring relationships in the context of the classroom; besides, supporter teachers prefer to see themselves as supportive mentors rather than assessors (Cameron-Jones & O' Hara, 1995). Much needs to be understood about the nature of decision-making processes within an environment of unequal roles and responsibilities, both within the school environment and between the University and the school. In this situation, the development of collaborative mentoring relationships needs to be further explored.

### **Different Types of Mentoring Relationships**

An important aspect of effective mentoring in the context of teacher education is the involvement of mentors in student teachers' activities. Feiman-Nemser and Beasley (1997) refer to the involvement of mentors as a form of assistance, to support beginning teachers when they appear to struggle for example to get over a challenge. However, mentors need to be aware of when and how to assist in order not to undermine the student teacher. Sensitivity towards other people's needs and perceptions is thus an important element of good mentoring (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010). Added to this, Baumi (2009) reported on the development of interpersonal and management skills such as positive assertiveness in student teachers, and these are deemed to be major indicators of effective relationships with supporter teachers.

Wang et al., (2008) reported that novice teachers could receive ongoing support that could enhance their knowledge of teaching by means of feedback. Consistent with this point, Goffman (1959) explains that



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information gathering through communication is indispensable for mutual relationships and teamwork. However effective feedback and communication can only be established within a climate of trust between supporter teachers and student teachers (Bradbury & Koballa Jr., 2008).

Based on Schon's (1983) theory of reflection, a mentor needs to assist the student teachers in reflecting on their practical teaching experience with a view to develop their pedagogical skills and improve on professional practice. Explaining this further, Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010) argue that robust pedagogical knowledge and skills would amongst others entail the ability of the mentors to link theory with practice along with mentees.

Further, Beck and Kosnick (2002) found that student teachers seem to appreciate being treated with respect, being seen as teachers and valued in terms of their ideas by the supporter teachers. And in a similar vein, Kennedy and Allan (2009) found that student teachers appreciate their status as novice teachers but express less favourable views on hierarchical values and advice from others involved in their education. Establishment of good relationships is seen as an important element of mentoring relationships (Le Cornu, 2009) coupled with emotional support (Beck & Kosnick, 2002) and time for student teachers to adjust to the characteristics and requirements of a new context in order to develop relevant professional skills (Barrera, Braley & Slate, 2010). This is in line with Shanks et al., (2012) idea of strengthening opportunities to engage with a variety of work contexts, yet much needs to be understood about this more 'diffused' idea of mentoring and how it might relate to the existing range of conceptions.

### **Methods**

From the literature, it is clear that the complexity of the mentoring process in initial teacher education lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations and approaches. Teachers' professional learning and career development through mentoring is a multi-layered construct. For instance, mentoring is a process that involves mutually guided communication and interaction between and/or among participants. Yet such processes are shaped by a range of contextual factors such as school policies, expectations, workplace practices, leadership styles. The starting point of this study was thus an exploration of mentoring, as a key dimension of teachers' career

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development, and situated as part of the everyday activities of teachers in schools and classrooms, with their physical objects, norms and visible cultural forms.

Drawing on an earlier study conducted by Wallace and Priestley (2011), everyday constructs of professional activity, such as, for example, working to a timetable, or being physically located within a classroom, are ‘real’, in the sense that they can exert causative influences on the course of social events. So for example, different decisions can be made on the time to be devoted for discussion or on what might be considered to be valuable learning goals which shape people’s attitudes towards communication and social interaction. Paying attention to such constructs can inform the exploration of the conceptions and expectations of teachers and student teachers regarding the collaborative mentoring, the underpinning processes of teachers’ professional learning and the implications that can be derived for teachers’ career development.

The following research questions guided the data collection process:

- i. How was mentoring in the classroom conceptualised by the participants within the teacher education reform project at the time of this study?
- ii. What are the expectations of the collaborative mentoring relationships between teachers and student teachers within the professional learning context under study?

### **Design of the Study**

The aim of the study was to gain insight into the different perceptions of mentoring in the classroom held by participants in the context of a newly reformed teacher education programme. It is important to remark that our intention was to explore the existing generic perceptions of mentoring and how these can affect career development. It is also important to note that we were not looking to evaluate the effectiveness of the partnership, or to describe the specific approaches to mentoring developed by the people who had been recruited to be part of this study. The intention was to enrich current theoretical perspectives on mentoring with the practical experience of participants in the classroom, and by so doing inform further research and development on collaborative mentoring. To this purpose, Valadez and Bamberger (1994) and Linde (2006) explained that the qualitative strategy aims at understanding reality as perceived by research participants and the meaning of

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activities and or behaviours in a specific context. The semi-structured interview allows the participants in a study to express their views and experiences. In the context of a semi-structured interview, statements can be clarified and expanded to provide a richer description of context and actions (Dunne, Pryor, & Yates, 2005). Six supporter teachers, seven student teachers and six teacher educators took part in the study. Some of the questions explored using the semi-structured interview included the participants' expectations of the practices and goals of mentoring. The questions were aimed at teasing out their perceptions of mentoring guided by collaborative and egalitarian philosophy.

Participants were selected according to a criterion sampling technique (Patton, 2002) based on participants holding relevant information about collaborative mentoring as experienced in this context. Supporter teachers were involved in mentoring third and fourth year students within a sustained period of teaching placement in school. Similarly, the teacher educators were involved in the design of the B.Ed. programme and in the supervision of student teachers' field experience. The supporter teachers and student teachers who took part in this study were contacted by using a consent form they had previously completed indicating their willingness to be involved in a follow-up study. The interviews with the supporter teachers and student teachers took place on school sites while the teacher educators were interviewed in their offices. All the participants were female with exception of one student and one tutor. This is consistent with the general gender distribution of the teaching population in Scotland. The majority of the supporter teachers were experienced classroom teachers. Five of them had more than fifteen years experience and only one of them had less than five years experience. Five of the student teachers interviewed were in their early twenties while the remaining two were in their late twenties. All the participants were white British nationals. Due to practical and organisational reasons it was not possible to collect information from matching pairs of teachers and student teachers which would have allowed for an analysis of dialogue across different perspectives. For the purpose of this paper however the data was sufficient to investigate a variety of conceptions of mentoring and support the evolving theoretical discussion. The focus of the study sought to remain generic rather than being linked to the specific mentoring processes developed by the participants.

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All interviews lasted for 30-45 minutes on average; they were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. By means of thematic coding methods data were reduced into manageable sections of coherent text (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We chose this approach as it helps us to understand the participants' subjective interpretations of mentoring relationships as experienced in this context. In doing this, the transcripts of interviews conducted were carefully read over while the digitally recorded interviews were listened to several times. Consistent and common ideas from the participants' views were then inductively developed and described as emerging themes (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After developing different categories of conceptions of mentoring, a second level of analysis involved the interrogation of the previously found categories in light of the literature. This process aligns with the pragmatist perspective to grounded theory whereby not only are data not detached from theory but theory is also understood in relation to practical instances and problems. Hence the original, emerging themes and the theoretical perspective on mentoring provided by the literature were interconnected through inductive and abductive inferences (Strübing, 2007) which are made visible in the organisation and presentation of the analysis. The themes were progressively re-examined, discussed amongst the authors for cross-analysis and corroboration. During the process of writing, the themes were also iteratively re-arranged to ensure that they provided insights into the participants' conceptions and expectations of the collaborative mentoring by the participants.

### **Credibility and validity**

To validate our data, we asked the participants to read over the transcripts of the interviews to check and indicate whether the text reflected what they had said. This procedure is referred to as member checking or feedback and it ensures the credibility of our data (Patton, 2002). All participants indicated that the transcripts correctly portrayed their views and understanding of mentoring processes in this context. Our engagement in extensive discussions about the data both within the group of co-authors as well as with our colleagues provided the chance to disclose potential biases or lack of understanding that might derive from working across different educational contexts. Through the process of dialogue and sharing of perceptions it was possible to enrich our understanding and add further credibility to the analysis of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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### Results

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed a set of dynamic tensions pointing to alternative ideas and purposes of mentoring. The ideas of ‘support and guidance’ were balanced against the idea of ‘enculturation’; the idea of learning to teach as the acquisition of practical skills was balanced against the idea of learning from and with other people. The first set of themes explores the layered meaning of ‘guidance’ in mentoring.

#### **Induction into school**

Mentoring between supporter teacher and student teachers is seen as a means by which student teachers are inducted into their host schools.

“I would encourage them to look at our policies, timetables, the way that the school works” (Supporter Teacher 5)

“It involves information about the school, about school policies, about ways of working within the school, approaches within the school, the overall school ethos” (Tutor 1)

This conception highlights the need for orientation to be given to student teachers. Most importantly, it highlights the recognition that the development of one’s own professionalism occurs within a given context, with its physical and cultural features. Such knowledge forms part of the teacher’s professional repertoire and has the potential to strengthen career development.

#### **Provision of guidance**

Related to induction, the mentoring relationship appears to develop first as a process of guidance for learning about the practices of classroom teaching:

“I suppose that they would kind of give me guidance...” (B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 2)

“You have to guide them and discuss with them what’s going to happen in the classroom” (Supporter Teacher 6)

“I would hope for somebody who would be able to guide...” (Tutor 3)

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In the first instance, mentoring is the mechanism through which student teachers are introduced and ‘shown round’ a new context, with its codes and practices. While acknowledging the importance of induction and guidance, one of the tutors underlines the importance of giving guidance based on students’ needs:

“The nature of the support has got to be based on the needs of the student teacher. So it’s that kind of contingent, responsive support that really works effectively I think” (Tutor 5)

The process of guidance through mentoring is not solely and simply a one-sided activity but it is shaped by the degree of awareness that people have about other people’s needs and dispositions.

### **Development of good practice**

Through guidance, student teachers can develop good practice in terms of teaching and classroom management:

“...showing you how to do something and then letting you go off and try it” (B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 1)

“It means demonstrating good practice and helps in supporting them obviously with different teaching styles” (Supporter Teacher 3)

“I think it’s also modelling of good practice and showing ways in which things might work” (Tutor 1)

The notion of guidance appears to be very closely aligned with the demonstration of good practice. In this respect, learning to become a teacher almost inevitably implies a process of apprenticeship to enable a novice to become accustomed with forms of established practice. However, if for the student teacher, good practice appears to be a point for departure into a new experience (‘letting you go off and try it’), the supporter teacher seems much more precise in terms of the outcomes that need to be achieved, e.g. it is the development of mastery in teaching. Guidance in this respect also points to a set of skills that should be acquired. Within the apprenticeship model potential tensions might emerge with regard to opportunity for student teachers to enter a space for experimentation and reflection. Interesting in this regard is the contribution of the tutor; the language adopted in the quotation above is a language of possibilities (‘might’) which reintroduced the opportunity for exploration and judgement within a ‘guided’ approach. Hence, even in the demonstration of good practice, there are possibilities for variation between showing and telling ‘how to do things’ and reflecting and analysing how things happened and how they ‘might be’.

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### **Joint decision making and sharing of ideas**

Mentoring is also perceived as a process of joint decision making and shared responsibility for what happens in the classroom. The student teachers value the opportunity to express and discuss ideas.

“I suppose to listen to my ideas and give his or her views on them” (B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 4)

The student’s perception is in line with the ideas of the tutor:

“It’s allowing the student the chance to think about a course of action and through higher order questioning, guiding them into their own conclusions” (Tutor 3)

The classroom teacher’s comments highlight the sheer importance of disciplined thinking, which is not simply generic but linked to specific actions:

“It’s allowing them to have conversations to think about what they’ve got to teach and how they’re going to teach it” (Supporter Teacher 2)

It is in such specificity however that power dimensions and feelings that mentors know better may arise, removing the student from the decision-making process:

“There are real power dimensions I think in the mentoring relationship, and I think it’s quite easy for us to take over the decision-making from the new teacher, because we know best” (Tutor 5)

In the context of the classroom, decisions have normative power and the professional responsibility classroom teachers have towards the children makes it even more difficult to stand back and give students a chance:

“It involves...sometimes having to make sure that the student is actually teaching the right thing because at the end of the day, it’s still my class and I’m responsible for the education of the children in my class” (Supporter Teacher 1)

From the data, mentoring can be conceived as a process through which the student teacher can be guided through thinking and reflecting on the appropriate course of action within such contexts. Opportunities for co-construction and sharing of responsibility seem visible but they also appear to be problematic. The classroom context is a strong determinant of goals and priorities of teaching, reinforcing local practices and established

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routines. In this scenario, the notion of co-responsibility emerges as one of the bones of contention as the classroom teacher is ultimately accountable for what happens to the class and to the student teacher.

The second set of themes explores the different parties' perceptions of the process of learning to teach and how these related to different expectations of mentoring. One set of ideas points to an idea of learning as a process of acquisition of knowledge and practices for teaching. The other set of ideas illustrates the opportunities that positive relationships bring to the process of sharing and co-construction of knowledge.

### **Being prepared**

A key theme that emerged from the data was a general consensus amongst the supporter teachers on the need for student teachers to be prepared on key aspects of the school curriculum and pedagogy:

“They expect me to have all knowledge of both curriculums” (B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 1\*)

“She expected me to come prepared and arrive on time, smartly dressed and ready to teach every day”.

(B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 3)

“The supporter teachers are hoping that they're getting somebody who knows something about learning and teaching” (Tutor 3)

Such results underscore the established conception of teachers holding a fixed set of knowledge and skills which are ready to be put into practice. This expectation is held up as if a clear division would exist between abstract and practical learning, and between the acquisition and the application of knowledge. (\*The B.Ed. 3 Student teacher 1 is referring to the old “5 to 14 curriculum” and the newly introduced “A curriculum for Excellence”).

### **Open to learning**

While being prepared for action, student teachers are also expected to be open to learning and acquire more practical knowledge from their supporter teachers.

“I think they generally expect the students to be open to learning and to pick up new ideas.” (Tutor 1);

Such learning is clearly shaped by the knowledge and practice of an experienced teacher:



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“...they really do need to listen to the teacher when she is maybe going over a lesson or discussing their planning with them” (Supporter Teacher 1)

This process is then further refined through feed-back on practice linked to a set of expectations:

“I have experienced difficulty when a student was unwilling to accept constructive criticism, unwilling to accept that they maybe weren't doing as well as they thought they were.” (Supporter Teacher 1)

Similarly, student teachers are expected to be open to learn about the school environment and develop good rapport with members of school community.

“I think it's important for them to obviously get to know as much about the school as possible”

(Supporter Teacher 5)

“I think a positive attitude towards, not only their school experience, but towards the school and being part of the staff” (Tutor 1)

These findings point strongly to a bonding relationship in mentoring that would enable the student teacher to work and act like a teacher does and so to ‘get by’ within the school environment (Forbes and McCartney, 2012). Conversely, the opportunities available to the classroom teacher for exploring their own teaching practice do not seem to fit into this frame.

### **Good management style**

A particular concern of the students is that of being able to find a way to manage children's behaviour in the classroom:

“For me to see how they use behaviour management techniques, that's probably what I would look for in a class teacher” (B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 1)

“I also spoke about behaviour issues and things like that with the student. That's important to see how to deal with different behaviour issues” (Supporter Teacher 6)

Hence, learning to become a teacher requires being party to a set of pre-existing skills and practices. This conception of knowledge for teaching as being mainly skills and best practices aligns well with a strong desire

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from the student teachers to be perceived as fully functioning teachers who are in charge of their classrooms.

However the way in which students are being presented to the classroom – the presentation of self to others – is a delicate matter:

“...the first placement I was introduced as a helper... so that was a bit patronising if you like” (B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 1)

“I got introduced as the student that will be coming in and working with you” (B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 1)

The following remarks illustrate the effects on children:

“I found it very difficult for some children who just saw me as the student and if I was to tell them off for behaviour and they would not listen, they would give a lot of back chat, which they wouldn't give to their teacher” (B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 1)

Issues of status appear to shape the students' perception that their knowledge or contribution may be somewhat lesser than those of an experienced teacher. The effect of being treated as a partner such as in the quotation below,

“I was introduced as Miss Cane and she was a teacher that was here for eleven weeks, I wasn't a student” (B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 3)

has the power to enhance the value of learning through practice. Being introduced to the pupils as a colleague also enabled her to acquire the desired status;

“...as a colleague, not an understudy, so the kids, in that way, knew that I was in charge as well, so it wasn't, like we can misbehave as much as we want because she's a student” (B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 3)

Hence the data reported so far point to a desire to act and being perceived as a real teacher; if learning to teach equates to practice and mastery of professional skills, then students expect to be able to perform their role accordingly. Yet, the classroom teacher is in charge. An important part of the learning process would thus

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involve the ability to handle the power dimension which appears to be intensified by the ethos of control established in the class.

As indicated earlier, the second set of ideas points to a different understanding of the mentoring process and associated expectations. What emerges is a view of the student teacher as somebody who is learning in the process of doing and interacting positively with the mentor.

### **Help with Planning**

Student teachers expect their supporter teachers to help them with how to plan their lessons and classroom activities.

“Letting you know things that might help you in terms of your planning for individuals’ progression”

(B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 1)

“The mentoring that I have been doing is just involved with them in planning and mainly planning their day to day work and their short term and long term planning” (Supporter Teacher 4).

So planning is key to effective learning and teaching for the student teachers. Most notably, gaining help on how to plan lessons and day to day activities is contrasted with simply trying out a readymade plan or being assessed on their made up plans.

### **Information about the class and children**

Gaining relevant information about the class and the individual children is also indicated as an important aspect of learning to teach:

“Detailing any educational needs within the classroom, any medical needs as and when required by the student” (B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 3)

“I would give them information about the children that I feel that is necessary for them” (Supporter Teacher 5).

Having information about children could help student teachers to devise an appropriate pedagogical approach, commensurate with each individual child’s learning ability. The emphasis here is placed upon the need

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to get to know who is involved in learning; it is contrasted with earlier statements about the need to have acquired a set of knowledge (e.g. curriculum) for delivery and application.

### **Being allowed to see theory and practice**

The participants describe placement as an opportunity to draw on prior learning to create contexts of practice:

“My expectations would be to be practicing what we’re learning in university, so all the theory we have been learning for all these years to finally be able to put that into practice” (B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 1)

“They’re hoping to use the pedagogical practices that they have learned about in university, and put them into practice on the field experience” (Tutor 3)

While a separation between theory and practice is clearly perceived to exist, it is also clear that student teachers value being given the opportunity not to separate their prior learning from what they are supposed to learn in placement. Indeed there is a sense that students may want to be ‘leaders’ of their own development. In such case it is not simply the practical and established knowledge of the expert teacher that counts but the provision of enabling environments for development in school is a necessity.

### **Feedback**

Finally, formative feedback is noted as a core mechanism for advancing learning:

“...that they would take time to talk to you about your progress” (B.Ed. 3 Student Teacher 2)

“It involves sometimes giving very positive feedback, sometimes giving negative feedback” (Supporter Teacher 1)

“Many of them would like feedback from the supporter teachers so that they know that they're on the right tracks or that they're not” (Tutor 4)

Feedback in this case takes the form of a conversation in a climate of trust. Most notably, the mentor is not a critic, although he/she should not shrink from critique:

“I expected them to point out if you were doing things wrong, but in a nice manner” (B.Ed. 4 Student Teacher 3)

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In general, these data show that expectations of supporter teachers and student teachers can be complementary and the two parties can embark in a form of collaborative mentoring relationship aimed at developing new practices for their career development. However, differences in the expectations between supporter teachers and student teachers may also occur. While student teachers expect guidance and a space for experimentation, the supporter teacher may expect professional practice. Such different expectations inevitably shape the relational dimension of the mentoring process to serve different developmental goals. In one case, support is provided in the form of ideas for developing projects, for making contacts with relevant people in the school and even for taking part in joint initiatives. In the other case, support equals training on the job, learning by modelling and keeping tight to a set of given standards and expectations.

### **Discussion**

This study was set out to explore participants' views of classroom mentoring in the context of a newly designed teacher education programme. As with any reform process, the implementation of a new model is shaped by a backdrop of existing beliefs and conceptions. Hence this study sought to gain an insight into the range of conceptions about mentoring and their effects on the process of learning to teach and teachers' career development.

From the analysis, mentoring appears to be strongly associated with the notion of guidance. This involves demonstration of good practice and induction into school. As we explained earlier, one of the key principles of the reformed programme was to promote constructivist models (Peavy, 1998 Savickas, 1997; Kincheloe, 2005) of learning and teaching, characterised by active involvement and sharing of ideas amongst the participants. From the examination of existing conceptions of mentoring however we note that cultural forms of school learning play a significant role in shaping mentoring relationships (Wallace & Priestly, 2011). The findings highlight the need for student teachers to understand school culture and norms in order to be integrated into the school community. Understanding of school contexts would enable the student teacher to tune in with colleagues and thus to 'get by' (Forbes & McCartney, 2012), understanding the socially and linguistically accepted customs, and thus to perform effectively through team work and consensus (Goffman, 1956). This indicates that student

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teachers can develop self efficacy and motivation for taking risk in order to foster the development of their professional skills and career when inducted appropriately (Bandura, 1977).

As Bradbury (2010) explains, mentoring as a socialisation process is a means for student teachers to develop professional knowledge and skills. However, while guidance is believed to be vitally important, it must be given moderately and consistently to the needs of student teachers. Hence guidance may not be or only minimally given in some situations. What the literature appears to suggest is the need for creating a space of possibilities to allow student teachers not only to practice but also to explore and reflect on alternative educational scenarios. This aspect is reinforced by the constructivist approach (Kincheloe, 2005; Savickas, 1997) and social cognitive theories (Bandura, 1977) as being fundamental to a creative and stable development of professional careers. Such language of possibility and experimentation was introduced by one of the tutors (*“showing ways in which things might work”*) and by some of the students (*“showing you how to do something and then letting you go off and try it”*; *“to listen to my ideas and give his or her views on them”*). In this view, mentoring is not restricted to the apprenticeship model, requiring mentees to rely solely on the more experienced mentors’ knowledge. Rather, it aligns with the critical constructivist view of mentoring based on mentor and novice seeing themselves as both teachers and learners partaking in equitable interactions (Aderibigbe, 2014; Aderibigbe et al., 2014; Kincheloe, 2005; Kafai et al., 2008; Savickas, 1997; Bandura, 1997). However, the data analysis showed a clear, emerging tension between what are possibly two alternative ways of looking at the process of learning to teach. One approach involves open decision-making and exploration of courses of action and outcomes, while the other is concerned with reinforcement and refinement of existing practices and expectations. The specificity of classroom norms makes it challenging to facilitate joint decision-making and equitable interaction. (*“It’s allowing them to have conversations to think about what they’ve got to teach and how they’re going to teach it”*, Supporter Teacher 2). So, student teachers would need to be skilful in order to translate what was discussed into innovative actions but also with respects for classroom norms. Being able to do this would also require the attainment of self-efficacy as Bandura (1997) argues that people in that category engage in risk taking endeavours aim at promoting their professional and career development.

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Indeed there appears to be a need expressed by some supporter teachers to instruct student teachers towards taking particular actions in order to safeguard pupils' learning. While this might not necessarily indicate that there could be no collaboration, such requirement to guide by instructing is indicative of the "inherent tensions within a collaborative approach intended to work around and across, institutional hierarchical structures" (Siry, 2011, p. 99). This may be connected with the view that schools' cultural norms tend to reinforce existing practices (Cuban, 1988) and the requirement for teachers to be seen as delivering teaching leading to positive assessment outcomes. So for example, from a supporter teacher perspective, student teachers are expected to come into school prepared. They need to be psychologically and presentationally ready to act as teachers (Goffman, 1959). In this sense, student teachers need to comply with visible cultural forms (Wallace & Priestley, 2011) such as school traditions, professional documents and language. While we concede that prior knowledge and understanding of any setting is a necessary element for any action, a strict policy of compliance to school norms and ideas may hamper innovation from student teachers (Rippon & Martin, 2006).

Hobson (2002) indicated that student teachers appreciate the possibility to teach using different methods through the support of their mentors. However, as we earlier pointed out, student and teachers' learning and mutual learning may be hindered when the emphasis is laid upon 'the good teaching styles' that are being exhibited by expert teachers and which are strictly consistent with schools' cultural forms. Common linguistic expressions pointing to 'good or best practice' may skew emphasis on refined routines while the opportunities for mentoring to motivate professionals to face challenges and to innovate may be overlooked. Most importantly, it is the discursive frame surrounding the notion of teachers' professionalism that is at stake. A model of technical rationality (Colucci-Gray & Fraser, 2008) defines a professional by means of accountable knowledge and skills and the policy discourse on training to become a 'professional' is imbued with the idea of acquisition of effective, powerful knowledge for teaching (Kennedy, Barlow & MacGregor, 2012).

The notion of 'technical professionalism' raises a further, crucial point with regard to culture and the relational space established within the classroom. A section of the data pointed out that student teachers desire to be seen in control of the class and be respected pupils. For instance, it was revealed that the way in which student

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teachers are introduced to pupils may be a signal of the social contract, based on power, which is being established between pupils and their teachers. The cultural environment supporting mentoring in the classroom can be a pivotal aspect of student teachers' professional and career development plan. A mentor who establishes an ethos of collaboration and participation through appropriate pedagogy can enable an important transition in student teachers' expectations. Indeed the data provide what may be a glimpse of the potential points of departure for such changes. Student teachers indicate that they expect their supporter teachers to provide them with information about the class and children for effective learning and teaching. In line with Goffman (1959), information gathering through communication is essential for maintaining mutual relationships, as prior experience may be relied on in the absence of information. However, this could lead to situations where cultural forms have to be adhered to if student teachers are not allowed to use their initiative to complement the information given to them. What emerges from the data is the desire expressed by the student teachers to feel 'safe' with respect to the examination of their practice. Many of their comments focus on key process elements – such as information gathering, planning and feedback as a form of learning. Thus, the provision of enabling environments and level playing fields by supporter teachers cannot be over-emphasised for student teachers' personal and professional development (Furlong & Maynard, 1995). It is also important to note that active involvements of student teachers in classroom activities do not translate into outright withdrawal from the classrooms by supporter teachers. However, the student teachers expect their supporter teachers to provide them with feedback as a way of supporting their learning. With feedback from their supporter teachers, it seems logical to suggest that student teachers can learn about what to do in order to improve their professional practice. So, communication has to be taken seriously by supporter teachers for feedback to be effectively given without demoralising student teachers.

### **Implications for Partnership and Teachers' Career Development**

This qualitative study was limited in that it was conducted within a specific reform context. This study however was intended to generate reflection on current possibilities for strengthening teachers' professional and career development. The findings point out that the value of the apprenticeship conception of mentoring needs to be



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appreciated in the initial teacher education context. This is a firmly established conception amongst teachers as it holds that guidance needs to be given to student teachers in order to strengthen their professional learning and career development. Without adequate guidance, it might be difficult for student and novice teachers to devise viable and quality career plans which could ultimately hamper their professional and career development. Equally however, this study draws on a reform which attempts to prepare teachers for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Partnership, joint working and collaboration were held up as core aspects of the reform. Evidence from the analysis however does not lie strongly on the side of collaboration which is an essential element of the constructivist career development and social cognitive theories. For this to be actualised, reorientation programmes promoting mentoring as a collaborative process through which teachers and student teachers can learn to improve on professional and career practice need to be embarked upon by ITE providers and school leaders. Most importantly, clarifications of expectations must be incorporated in such reorientation programmes. In our view, achieving the goals of collaborative mentoring requires discussion and clarification of the fundamental aims of a partnership and teachers career advancement approach. In our project, communication occurred between ITE provider and schools through funding of teachers to attend in-service day or twilight training sessions. The training programmes offer teachers the opportunity to learn more and further develop skills required to strengthen their professional and career development. It is therefore necessary that similar provision is made in any teacher education contexts in order for support capable of promoting teachers' professional and career development to be sustained.

Further, and most importantly, this study brought to the fore the tensions and possibilities which are embedded in the cultural environment of the school. As indicated in the analysis, compliance to professional standards is a strong marker of teachers' work. Indeed, teachers hold up to a concern for practice which leads to a perception that the application of knowledge precedes and exceeds its production. So, student teachers and teachers new to a school context would need to understand the school ethos in order to adapt well within the school community. Understanding and respect for school ethos may in turn open doors for student and novice teachers to learn in friendly environments and thereby fostering their professional and career development.

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However within the current policy context, and particularly with the advent of the new curriculum, teachers have been confronted with ideas of socio-constructivism and inclusion that are desirable but by no means unproblematic. This scenario poses great challenges and an enormous array of opportunities for personal and professional development in practice. We suggest this to be the point of departure for creating a shared space for partnership work between Universities and schools, whereby all people involved are engaging with finding suitable responses to local needs. We argue that mentoring is essential to teacher preparation and career development; but currently it is very restricted to delivering expected outcomes and it appears to refrain from joint experimentation. In our project, schools were adamant in supporting the project; however the project never seemed to fully pose for teachers the genuine questions that an inclusive and participatory learning environment of the like proposed by the new curriculum (Priestley & Humes, 2010).

Real change can occur if time is allocated for discussion with respect to what is to be taught and how it can be evaluated. This activity should feature large as part of the arrangements for partnership and mentoring as a tool for teacher preparation and career development. The student teachers who are supported in cultivating informal learning opportunities and turning them into practice (Shanks et al., 2012) may be the conduit for bringing forth the participatory forms of inquiry in which people are inducted to relationships of reciprocity and trust (Forbes & McCartney, 2012). Such process includes the classroom as a community of learning which extends beyond the school; it embraces the value of learning with and from others in civic settings and re-frames the role and identity of mentors. Mentoring if taken seriously will support interaction amongst a diversity of learners and the possibility to bring forth opportunities for the professional and career development of teachers.

### **Suggestions for Further Studies**

Future studies should include a comparative examination of mentoring practices across different teacher education programmes to identify models of mentoring which can enhance the professional learning and development of *all* participants. The impact of supporter teachers' years of experience on student teachers' professional learning may also be explored as part of a larger study to gain a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which collaborative mentoring can facilitate mutual learning between experts and novices. Further, a

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longitudinal study could be conducted to explore the features of mentoring experiences of student teachers from year 1 through to year 4 and the role played by specific instances of collaboration to enhance confidence, and creativity in teachers' professional careers. The use of case studies with more time dedicated to exploration of mentoring relationships in the classroom may be considered as part of such longitudinal study.

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