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Improving the professional practice experience in Australia – a Framework for pre-service teacher mentor program planning

Pre-service teacher mentoring programs have a large role to play within the Australian educational context, where schools not only share responsibility for assessing the aptitude of pre-service teachers but also take on the role of preparing teachers for the range of social and emotional challenges of the practice. Making the task of pre-service teacher mentoring even more difficult is the significant importance of each of these roles. Clearly we need to ensure pre-service teachers are capable of achieving the graduate stage Australian Professional Standards for Teachers prior to being assigned their own classroom; however, equally important is the need to prepare pre-service teachers for the types of social and emotional challenges that are contributing to poor teacher attrition rates around the country. As we strive to develop graduate teachers who are confident, creative, show initiative and are willing to take risks in the classroom, the research shows that many school-based practicums are falling short of the mark.

A common strategy, for example, whereby coordinators assign pre-service teachers to the most experienced, often results in pre-service teachers feeling intimidated and obligated to conform to mentor ways of thinking (Patrick, 2013, p. 210). Similarly, it is argued by Sundli (2007) that as long as current mentoring programs continue to require mentors to be accountable for assessing and evaluating teacher performance, teachers will be increasingly depen-



dent upon their mentor and resort to *cloning* in order to achieve positive evaluations (p. 209–212). Devos (2010) provides additional disparagement, finding that “*through the discourses of professional standards new teachers are being constructed as particular sorts of teachers*” (p. 1222). The current system also tends to neglect the significance of prior learning and the development of ongoing mentor relationships, often resulting in conflicting goals

- **e-Shortcuts** – Wisdom for successful school leadership and management
- **e-Teaching** – Management strategies for the classroom
- **e-Technology** – Technology in the classroom
- **e-Early Learning** – Thinking on early learning

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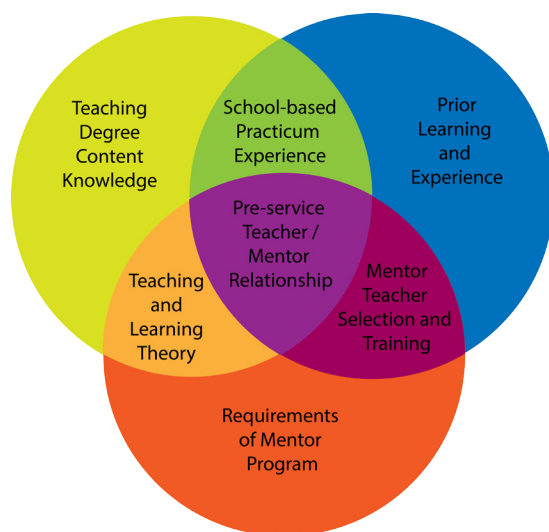


Figure 1: The Framework for Pre-service Teacher Mentor Program Planning

and beliefs about the nature and purpose of the mentoring program.

The Framework for Pre-service Teacher Mentor Program Planning (see Figure 1) places the pre-service teacher and mentor relationship at the heart of any proposed mentor program and is a structured approach for program coordinators to follow when planning pre-service teacher mentoring programs. Organised with the most important considerations towards the centre and reflecting the relationships that exist between each component, the intention of the framework is for coordinators to identify areas in need of substantial consideration in order to achieve successful program outcomes.

Pre-service Teacher / Mentor Relationship

It is widely recognised that the relationships pre-service teachers establish with their mentors have a major influence upon the professional practice of pre-service teachers (Le Cornu, 2010, p. 200) and for pre-service teacher mentoring programs to be most successful, that is, most rewarding and mutually beneficial, the research suggests that collaborative and reciprocal relationships are most effective (Patrick, 2013, p. 223). The objective, therefore, of any pre-service teacher mentoring program should be to establish positive and reciprocal relationships between the mentor, pre-service teacher and wider school community.

By considering each stage of the Framework for Pre-service Teacher Mentor Program Planning it is possible for program coordinators to put in place a structure that will support and nurture the pre-service teacher/mentor relationship. The remaining elements of the Framework elaborate further on the nuances of this relationship and are in place to enhance its growth and development in pursuit of positive outcomes for pre-service teachers, mentors and host schools.

School Based Practicum Experience

Consideration of the pre-service teacher's prior practicum experience can help to determine which of the three main archetypes (or ideals) of mentoring are most appropriate: mentoring as supervision, mentoring as support, or mentoring as collaborative self-development (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, Edwards-Groves, 2014, p. 158). Pre-service teachers with limited practicum experience, for example, may be more suited to a mentoring as supervision model, whereas final year practicum teachers might benefit more from a collaborative, self-developmental approach.

Teaching and Learning Theory

Not only does the determination of a particular mentoring archetype provide clarity for the participants but it also helps to inform which teaching and learning theory is most appropriate for underpinning the program. Mentoring for supervision, for example, may require a more behaviourist approach whereas more collaborative, self-developmental programs would benefit from a constructivist approach, including such components as:

- Learning taking place over time in a continual and gradual process;
- The mentor role as active and reflective;
- Learning outcomes, such as self-awareness, critical reflection and creativity;
- Individual interpretation of the environment;
- Opportunities for experience and continuous exploration.

(Dominguez, Hager, 2013, p. 177)

Mentor Teacher Selection and Training

As proposed earlier, the most experienced teachers don't necessarily make the best mentors and by determining the most appropriate theoretical and archetypal approach, a diverse range of potential mentors is revealed. Younger or new teachers as mentors, for instance, may be more easily related to by pre-service teachers and result in more reciprocal relationships. Providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to meet with potential mentors and negotiate their mutual expectations may increase the likelihood that more collegial professional relationships can be established (Patrick, 2013, p. 223).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2015) found 64% of pre-service teacher mentors received no training for their role (p. 10), yet mentors are more likely to employ effective mentoring strategies if they have undertaken appropriate preparation. Enhancing mentoring pedagogy through the development of a shared discourse for mentoring, conversations about mentoring practice, and training across the wide variety of potential mentor functions and skills can help to support the collegial and reciprocal nature of a mentor program (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson, 2009, p. 212).

Requirements of the Mentor Program

It is widely recognised that performance based forms of professional practice experience, such as those legislated within Australia, encourage an emphasis on performance rather than on practice, discouraging students from using the experience as an opportunity to experiment, or reflect on their practice and the workplace issues encountered (Axford, 2005, p. 99). Prescribed by the universities, pre-service teacher assessment and other requirements of mentor programs, such as minimum teaching hours, can impact heavily upon the relationships being forged and the structure of the program itself. Maintaining close relationships with university Field Placement Officers can not only help to clarify program requirements but also helps to maintain the balance of responsibility that Kemmis and Ahern (2012) suggest is paramount for the successful education of teachers (p. 220).

Prior Learning and Experience

Considering the prior learning and experience of pre-service teachers enables mentor program coordinators to develop more personal and appropriate practicum experiences and may impact upon mentor selection and decisions about which classes are to be taught. Considering a pre-service teacher's experience in areas such as subject content knowledge, digital literacy, behaviour management or cultural awareness can also enable a mentor to gain a clear understanding of the degree of support or guidance that is required by the pre-service teacher. Sundli (2007) recognises that in many current programs, "student teachers' personal qualifications, ideas and reflections are not stressed" (p. 213). The Framework aims to provide opportunities for teachers to share and best utilise their prior understandings and values.

Teaching Degree Content Knowledge

The final consideration proposed by the Framework is the variety of mandatory and elective content teachers have covered within their university courses. Pre-service teachers complete professional practice experiences throughout various stages of their university education and achieving a balance, during the practicum, between classroom observations and the freedom to put into practice what has been learnt about teaching at university is essential for maintaining pre-service teacher initiative and engagement in the process.

Pointedly, exploring the amount of teaching degree content knowledge obtained by teachers also provides increased clarity for mentor program coordinators in determining the extent to which the mentor is expected to be the link between teaching theory and practice. Where in the past, mentors were expected to be a strong link, focusing more on subject content and pedagogy, it is now becoming evident that mentors are equally valuable in guiding mentees around the craft of teaching, through means

of reflection and reciprocity (Sundli, 2007, p. 213).

Conclusion

The Framework for Pre-service Teacher Mentor Program Planning makes it evident that no single mentoring model should apply to all schools or all pre-service teachers. Where a behaviourist approach may be necessary in one instance, the prior learning and relative experience of the next candidate may, in turn, demand a more collaborative or constructivist style. By using the framework to design programs aimed at satisfying pre-service teacher needs and goals, mentor program coordinators can improve the outcomes for their participants; providing the right type of mentoring, helping pre-service teachers learn in a way that suits them best and by developing the pivotal pre-service teacher mentor relationship that leads to graduate teachers who are confident, creative, show initiative and are willing to take risks in the classroom.

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I think a role model is a mentor – someone you see on a daily basis, and you learn from them.
Denzel Washington