Using a supportive mentoring relationship to aid independent action research

National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise

Aims of the project

The primary aim of this project was to provide a supportive, pro-active and practical mentoring partnership in which individual teachers could conduct their independent action research. The results were actually far more significant than the original aim suggested and extended beyond the boundaries of the action research itself. Research mentoring led to tangible and long-term benefits both for our personal development and our professional development as teachers. The key findings are summarised below.

Dimensions of the study

Bitterne Park School is an LEA comprehensive with 1400 pupils and 90 members of staff situated within the eastern area of the city of Southampton. The projects were undertaken as the initial stages of a Masters Degree in Professional Practice. The focus of the first MA project was to engage in research mentoring through action research. This involved working independently on action research projects within our classrooms and acting as research mentors to one another. The project began in May 2005 and was completed in July 2005.

Summary of main conclusions

- The birth of the reflective practitioner
  We have both been given the opportunity and skills to become reflective practitioners, which we are confident has in turn improved the quality of our teaching and the learning of the pupils in our classrooms.

- Challenge to personal and professional practice
  The demands of the MA Module provided us with the professional challenge we both needed and benefited us both personally and professionally. This we largely attribute to the strength of the mentoring relationship we developed.

- Re-evaluation of the nature of mentoring
  As a result of being involved in a research mentoring relationship our original views and preconceptions had to be completely re-appraised.

- Appreciation of the benefits of collaborative research mentoring to aid individual action research.
  Initially we were both reluctant and reticent about pairing up with a research mentor and were keen to be self-sufficient. However, we have both come to appreciate the benefits of working collaboratively with a fellow researcher and the gains being in a partnership can bring.

Background and context

As part of continued professional development (CPD), Bitterne Park School offered its teachers the opportunity to participate in an 'in house' MA Programme. The course provider was Bath Spa University in conjunction with Creative Partnerships. We were both keen to be part of the MA Programme and enrolled on the course. Initially the focus was on the action research element of the unit. As teachers of separate subjects, English (Rachele) and Geography (Donna), the individual action research foci were quite different.

Within the English classroom, the focus was on releasing the capacity for imagination within the constraints of the Literacy Strategy. This research was conducted using a high ability Year 9 group. In Geography, the focus was the examination of ways of engaging pupils, using Gardner's Research on Multiple Intelligences, and to structure a series of lessons aimed at fulfilling the criteria for each of the intelligences. This research was conducted using a top set Year 8 Geography group. It was not until later that the importance of the research mentoring aspect of these individual action research projects became apparent. Once we had established a collaborative relationship, we engaged with research literature to help us develop an approach to mentoring from which we would both benefit.

Methods and strategies

The research mentoring partnership that evolved in this study was (initially) not one of choice. We were individually far more concerned with engaging in the action research that we felt had some genuine educational benefit to ourselves as practitioners and to the pupils in our charge. The MA module required us to engage in mutual research mentoring and to consider our needs as novice teacher researchers. We were asked by our course tutor to select a colleague to mentor during our individual action research projects. The guidance given was to select a peer whose research focus shared similarities with our own. This system actually proved to be more difficult than it at first appeared as we discovered that a successful mentoring relationship relies on more than simply a common end focus.

The practical implication was that we would be supported and would in turn support colleagues whilst continuing individual action research. We felt the need for a supportive and understanding ear that worked in parallel with a candid and critical eye. We also needed encouragement and affirmation because as novice teacher researchers, we felt daunted and a little overwhelmed as to the scale of the projects we were undertaking and the professional and personal demands we were placing on ourselves. However, we believed that this type of support was the role of our course tutor and not to be provided by another colleague who wasn't actually an 'expert mentor'. As individual teacher researchers, we both felt strongly independent and believed it to be unnecessary to 'baby sit' a colleague through their research…a feeling we freely modified as time progressed.

The research mentoring relationship was born primarily from scheduled and ad-hoc meetings as the logistics of the school day allowed. Much of the day-to-day mentoring and critique of individual action research took place electronically in the form of email using a web-based snapshot (on which we were recording and analysing our research findings) as a point of reference. The development of individual reflective journals enabled critical reflective thought, engagement with and analysis of the mentoring support that had been received.

We looked at different mentoring models to guide us in our professional relationship. These included:

- Brookes and Sikes (1997), who argue the case for a stepped relationship in mentoring that changes as the competencies of the mentee improve with practice, from one where the apprenticeship model is dominant to one where the mentor acts as co-enquirer. Brookes and Sikes also write about the mentor as co-enquirer, where there is an equal relationship between mentor and mentee and they work 'as an equal in the process of enquiry in the knowledge that he or she may also gain from this, an exercise close to action research';

- Mullen and Lick (1999), who regard mentoring as a 'synergised learning process' rather than a one-way apprenticeship where the mentor passes information to the mentee;

- Fletcher (2000), who argues that if the mentoring relationship develops as it should, based on honesty, openness and trust, then this will lead to action research occurring. Fletcher compares mentoring with action research as a cycle of planning-experimentation-review. Although the mentoring relationship might come to an end when the mentee or mentor moves on, it is not long before those people are involved in new mentoring relationships which brings new challenges but more experience and the process begins all over again.

Conclusion

We believe that the most significant outcome of the time spent engaging in action research was actually a by-product of the mentoring relationship itself. We were forced to address our preconceptions and negative experiences of the nature of mentoring and what it entailed. We had previously encountered unsupportive and uncooperative mentor relationships that had proved destructive and demoralising, the very opposite to the desired outcome. As training teachers, we encountered mentors who we felt were undermining our self-confidence as well as our attempts to improve our practice, and we were thus forced to adopt a wholly self-sufficient approach to our teaching.

We actively sought to classify our innate mentoring style against proposed models of mentoring, as mentioned above, and were able to identify models that work within the particular confines and structure of a school. We have begun to realise that these models cannot be used in isolation but should be used as a 'spring board' for further advancements; for example, the apprenticeship model of mentoring is probably the type of relationship we would have favoured at the beginning of the course as we would have welcomed our course tutor teaching us rather than just guiding us through the process. However, as the course progressed we came to appreciate we could use the input we received to guide us in further developing our own research mentoring relationship. It soon became clear that a research mentor is very much someone who asks probing and open questions but leaves you on your own to make up your mind and formalise your own ideas.
Over time the mentoring style we favoured was much in

line with Mullen and Lick's definition, where the synergy comes from working collaboratively with someone on a pathway of co-enquiry which hopefully leads to greater successes than working independently. This we understand as being what research mentoring is all about. We would support the definition offered by Fletcher (2000) of research mentoring as 'creative collaboration between teachers as researchers and other researchers' where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts themselves. This idea is at the core of Gestalt Philosophy and we have been able to see its relevance here too. Now we feel more confident in our own abilities as both action researcher and as research mentor to each other, and feel empowered, energised and motivated enough to tackle the further challenges offered by this MA course.
One of our greatest discoveries was that mentoring is a two-way learning process. In the past we had always wrongly assumed that the people mentoring us were the authority and had completed all the learning they needed. We had not considered that the whole mentoring process was a learning tool for the mentor too.
We also came to appreciate the value of feedback, understanding that it is not the feedback per se which is important, but how it is conducted and delivered. The feedback needs to be delivered in a constructive and honest manner and in a climate of complete openness and trust. In addition mentoring has involved not only professional development for both the mentor and the mentee, but also offered a wealth of opportunity for personal development, as both parties learned about themselves through being part of a rigorous mentoring relationship.

Through participating in research mentoring, it became clear that the benefits to the individual researcher would be far more significant and sustained than the outcomes of the action research project itself. These benefits came in the form of personal challenges to attitudes towards mentoring that had been embedded in our professional and personal experience. Our views on mentoring were transformed from being cynical and concerned with the negative aspects of a mentoring relationship - the time it requires, the inherent inequality in the relationship - to a genuine epiphany of positive experience that a supportive research mentor partnership can give. We came to appreciate the mutual benefits that being one equal half of a pair can give when conducting the individual research. It was a step that took courage, professional respect and trust, but reaped rewards that we hadn't believed possible. The experience of research mentoring created a new and rejuvenated enthusiasm for professional development and for the profession itself.

Research mentoring acted as the catalyst for a more highly developed individual researcher; essentially we were stronger researchers as one half of a mentoring partnership than we would have been as individuals. A research mentoring partnership doesn't halve the researcher but doubles the capacity for fulfilling action research.

Suggestions for further reading

Fletcher, S. (2000) *Mentoring in Schools: A Handbook of Good Practice*, London: (originally published by Kogan Page 2000) reprinted by Taylor and Francis 2004

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Fletcher, S (2005) *'Research mentoring; The Missing Link in Educational Research':*
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Mullen, C. and Lick, D. (1999) *New Directions in Mentoring: Creating a Culture of Synergy*, London: Falmer Press

Parsloe, E. and Wray, M. (2000) *Coaching and Mentoring*, London, Kogan Page, Chapter 6

Smith, P. and West-Burnham, J. (1993) *Mentoring in the Effective School*, London: Longman, Chapter 5
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