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Genuine conversation: the enabler in good mentoring of pre-service teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study confirms the role of genuine conversation as the enabler in good mentoring of pre-service teachers. The practicum plays an essential role in moving the pre-service teacher beyond learning about teaching to the practice of teaching. Yet the benefit of the practicum is often constrained by relational tensions, disappointment and frustrations for both the pre-service teacher and the mentor. The authors report on the findings drawn from stories and experiences of pre-service teachers and mentors as they participated in a final practicum in a range of Australian secondary schools. This paper uses social learning theory as a framework for understanding the key aspects of pre-service teacher mentoring: specifically, Wenger's three interrelated concepts of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Conversation plays a critical role in these areas and hence enables successful practicum experiences. Recommendations to enhance professional conversations focus on strengthening the relationship through considered pre-service teacher placement, close school/university partnerships, mentor programmes and the selection of appropriate mentors.

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Introduction

Genuine conversations play an important enabling role in the mentoring relationship by nurturing the pre-service teachers, supporting their identity, as well as guiding their teaching practice (Nias, cited in Kelchtermans (2009), pp. 202–203). Research has confirmed that positive practicum experiences assist teacher development and confidence (NCATE, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Mitchell, Clarke, & Nuttall, 2007; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Smith & Lowrie, 2010). Wenger's theory (1998) suggests that learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon within the lived experience and part of the social world. Gadamer (2004) refers to the idea of genuine conversation, a conversation that we tend to fall into, that takes on its own twists and reaches its own conclusion, with the partners conversing rather than one person leading. Gadamer (2004) argues that there is a 'critical distinction between

authentic and inauthentic dialogue' suggesting that openness and the concept of questioning are essential in order to grow from experience and necessary in order to be aware of one's 'finitudes and limitations' (p. 360). Solutions to problems and ideas do not occur unexpectedly, with genuine conversations allowing for openness. Gadamer (2004) refers to this as the 'art of questioning further, – the art of thinking' (p. 360). His ideas are useful when considering the need for working out common meaning between the mentor–mentee and for teacher learning. Common language must therefore be worked out in the conversation with successful conversations coming under the influence of the truth and thus binding the pre-service teacher to the mentor within the school community (Gadamer, 2004, p. 371). Real conversations according to Gadamer (2004) are often something of chance, with the flavour of surprise and lightness, leading to an elevation of experience and enrichment of self (Dorsal, 2002, p. 188).

The literature emphasises the powerful role of emotions in mentor–mentee relationships where communication between the supervising teacher and the pre-service teacher becomes most critical (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2007; Hawkey, 2006; Kelchtermans, 2009). According to Aspfors and Bondas (2013), the quality of the mentoring relationship is the core of good teaching and communication within the school community.

The supervising teacher's management of these conversations, the interpersonal relationships and the learning context are a major determinant of the pre-service teachers' learning (Borko, cited in Hascher et al., 2007).

This study captures the understandings, from six pre-service teachers and eight supervising teachers, of the most important aspects of mentoring. Wenger's (1998) social learning theory with three interrelated concepts – mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire – provides the framework for analysis of the results. This study contributes to the literature as it argues that within each of Wenger's (1998) interrelated concepts conversations are the important enabler, with genuine conversations optimising successful learning for the pre-service teacher during the practicum. The results found that genuine conversations play a leading role in supporting the pre-service teacher to socially understand schools and teaching, thus supporting their personal and professional growth.

Theoretical framework

The study is located in a social constructionist, epistemological framework where pre-service teacher mentoring is viewed as socially constructed practice and relationships are affected by personalities, past histories, the school setting and the emotional decisions being made (Lucas, 2001).

This paper uses the Wenger (1998) theory on learning, meaning and identity as the framework for considering learning in the social situation of the school practicum. Learning is a complex process where the individual is actively participating in the social world of the school community. Wenger describes learning as a social phenomenon within the context of lived experiences and social participation, including sharing passion, knowledge and expertise through interaction (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2000). As social beings, we become central to the learning that is occurring. Meaning occurs individually and collectively; the practice of learning results in mutual engagement. This human action is a continuous reciprocal interaction between behaviour, cognitive and environmental influences (Bandura, 1977). As a community of learners, we define our worth and develop identity.

Furthermore, Wenger's theory (1998, pp. 72–74) characterises three interrelated concepts of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, all of which are necessary to maximise social learning. They are described as follows:

Mutual Engagement: occurs through participation in the community where members establish norms and build collaborative relationships.

Joint Enterprise: is built through interactions and creates shared understanding. The joint enterprise is continually negotiated by its members and is sometimes referred to as the 'domain' of the community.

Shared Repertoire: the community produces a set of shared resources, used in the pursuit of their joint enterprise.

These concepts are relevant to pre-service teachers as they enter the community of practice in a school. They have to build collaborative relationships, learn the norms and expectations of the profession as well as understand the teachers' intuitive practices. It is the candid conversations across the three concept areas that impact the success of the practicum.

Wenger's three concepts of his social learning theory have been used to order our review of the relevant literature. The literature of multiple researchers supports the importance of the conversations in mentoring across a wide variety of fields.

Mutual engagement

Mutual engagement is fundamental to the mentoring relationship. Research holds that engagement is complex and demanding, and positive dialogue is essential for reciprocal commitment (Bloomfield, 2009; Hastings, 2004). Mentoring is time consuming; it involves extra work and offers little in the way of status, recognition or incentive; it involves intensive personal commitment, exposure and collaboration (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Hastings, 2004; Hobson, Ashby, Malderz, & Tomlinson, 2009). There is a lack of agreement in the literature in relation to the benefit of pairing of mentor and mentees with similar pedagogical and philosophical beliefs (Hobson et al., 2009). However, mentoring is recognised as relational and 'a persistent challenge to one's sense of self' (Bullough, 2005, p. 144).

Providing opportunity for pre-service teachers to engage in early conversations may lessen the stress levels on practicum (Danyluk, 2013) and socially bind the mentor and mentee (Wenger, 1998). Kagan's (1992) research on teacher identity supports the concept of social binding, where growth occurs through a continuum of learning, involving self-reflection and acknowledging limitations to prior beliefs and knowledge. Pre-service teacher mentoring can become a collegial, co-mentoring process if a collaborative relationship is allowed to develop through mutually shared goals, respectful, open conversation, feedback and empathy (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Kochan & Trimble, 2000).

The mentoring relationship can involve issues of power and control, as well as dependency and intimacy; the extent to which these issues can be resolved positively depends upon personalities, the style of mentoring and the right balance of roles (Hobson et al., 2009; Sundli, 2007). The pre-service teacher may also view some of the challenges of the professional experience as competitive and conflictive (Bloomfield, 2010). This view is compounded if the mentor has a tendency to encourage 'cloning', or limits experimentation (Jipson & Paley, 2000; Sundli, 2007). Having a clear self-image is important for pre-service teacher growth, otherwise 'knowledge remains superficial and easily replaced' (Kagan, 1992,

p. 146). Regular ‘explicit conversations’ are effective in overcoming perceived challenges in the relationship (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Margolis, 2007).

Joint enterprise

Joint enterprise is reflected in mentoring procedures that build interactions and shared understandings. Research on student voice in mentoring found that pre-service teachers ‘clearly expressed a desire to be viewed as partners and have a more active role’... in their own learning process (Flavian & Krass, 2015, p. 37). The research of Venheule and Verhaeghe (2009) found identity construction is based on ‘qualities implied in identity categories’ (p. 402) which grants membership to a group. The mentor becomes a source of cultural knowledge, sharing awareness of the context and protocols of the school and its membership (Maynard, 2000). Conversations during the practicum provide opportunity for both mentor and mentee to be active in combining theory and practice (Bloomfield, 2009) which leads to increased self-esteem and confidence for the mentee (Zembylas, 2005).

Deep reflection through discomfiting dialogues allows for genuine conversations about personal frameworks that can be challenged and explored (Kelchtermans, 2009). Conversations that focus on ‘core reflection’ assist in developing pre-service teachers’ confidence and help to align core values and beliefs within the shared experiences (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005).

Mentors need to be able to explain day-to-day decisions to help the pre-service teachers in developing their own practice and to create joint understandings (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Bullough, 2005). This involves the mentors being transparent and articulate about their decision-making and pedagogy (Hudson, 2013; Margolis, 2007).

Communication was identified as a key mentoring action in developing personal and joint professional goals of the mentor and mentee (Ambrosetti, Knight, & Dekkers, 2014). A positive mentor relationship leads to conversations that assist the pre-service teacher in feeling a part of the teaching community. It allows the pre-service teacher the freedom to practise classroom skills, and to collaboratively share and explore new ideas and possibilities (Hascher et al., 2007; Sim, 2006). Shared interactions help to build professional confidence, which provides a sense of well-being for the pre-service teacher and facilitates on-going collaboration (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

During the practicum, the pre-service teacher works towards achieving a joint understanding through conversations and actions. According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), this ‘learning is defined as an interplay between social competence and personal experience’ (p. 227). Earlier work by Lave and Wenger (1991) focused on the learner’s role as an apprentice joining an established community of practice. This involves first observing, then being socialised into the accepted practices, openly sharing and discussing personal histories: ‘... to do this you need a shared confidential atmosphere to avoid ... restricting the dialogue to a technical level of teaching’ (Talvitie, Peltokallio, & Mannisto, 2000, p. 86). The rules of teacher behaviour must be explicitly and implicitly spelt out in both conversations and practice, in order to fit into the ethos of the school (Sundli, 2007).

Shared repertoire

Mentoring that guides teaching practice needs to focus on shared learning opportunities with conversations that challenge the pre-service teachers’ current thinking and approaches,

going beyond mere occupational socialisation and affective support (Rigelman & Ruben, 2012; Van Velzen, Volman, Brekelmans, & White, 2012). Focus needs to be on guiding cognitive development, where mentors are ‘co-thinkers who engage in productive consultations’ (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 22). Mentoring processes that guide teacher practice rely on a shared partnership and honest conversation where ‘the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. 385).

Truly effective mentoring must move beyond emotional support or brief technical advice; it involves shared practices (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The research of Beauchamp and Thomas (2010) identifies the important role of recognising candidate’s strengths and constructing from them possible futures for the teacher. As such, mentors’ words can encourage or discourage a pre-service teacher’s practice and pathway into the profession (Keogh, Dole, & Hudson, 2006). Mentor relationships must provide opportunities for conversations and guidance on teaching approaches, planning and classroom management (Hascher et al., 2007). Yet current research by Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, and Bergen (2011) indicated that during mentoring dialogues mentors tended to focus more on the pace at which the pre-service teacher covered the prescribed curriculum rather than their specific learning needs. Shared conversations about practice include explicit self-reflection and opportunity for meta-reflection, both of which are needed in developing critical awareness of professional problem-solving practices (Senese, 2007; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) point to the personal and professional dimensions of teacher identity that guide the pre-service teacher in ‘how to be, how to act and how to understand’ (p. 178), as well as the need to negotiate and re-shape experiences from within experiences. Mentoring conversations that guide the process of meta-reflection enables pre-service teachers from differing language and cultural backgrounds to move from a descriptive focus to shared critical evaluation and reflection position (Hourani, 2013).

There is consensus that mentoring needs to involve shared conversations on activities such as modelling, teaching, assessing and evaluating (Bloomfield, 2010; Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Bullough, 2005; Hastings, 2004; Sundli, 2007). However, the choice to be a mentor is often a voluntary one and the system is then often ad hoc (Hobson et al., 2009; Reid, 2011). There is often a tendency for teachers’ own *habitus* to predispose them to form the practice into what is most comfortable, rather than an explorative conversation of joint teaching ideas (Reid, 2011). Shared conversations that deconstruct epistemological and pedagogical beliefs are particularly important in guiding the pre-service teacher (Maynard, 2000; Reid, 2011).

This study looked at the role conversations had within each of Wenger’s (1998) inter-related concepts to address the following research question: *What aspect/s of practicum mentoring were viewed by the mentor and mentee as most important?*

Method

Participants and data collection

This research draws on data collected from a two-year study on improving the practicum, carried out as part of a school–university partnership between the Association of Independent Schools New South Wales and an Australian university. Interviews were used to explore the experiences and perceptions of both the mentors and pre-service teachers during the practicum.

Interviews were conducted over a period of two months following the end of a practicum experience. Six independent high schools were selected, with each school nominating to mentor a pre-service teacher. The independent schools provided a range of contexts (e.g. single sex, comprehensive, co-educational, religious, medium to large enrolments). This represented the different educational institutions in the independent school sector in metropolitan Sydney, Australia. The 14 participants were representative of mentors, ($n = 8$, m:2, f:6) and secondary pre-service teachers, ($n = 6$, m:2, f:4) engaged in their final professional experience during 2012. The pre-service teachers were from both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The final practicum (8 weeks) was supervised with the expectation that the pre-service teachers would, by the end of the last few weeks be teaching independently, up to 80% of a teacher's workload.¹ The expectation of the pre-service teacher was to be supported to gradually take on the role and responsibilities in the classroom. The mentor was expected to support this process and to assess the pre-service teacher's performance against national professional teaching standards.

The interview questions were designed in an open-ended, semi-structured style with the interviewer assuming only a guiding role. This provided an opportunity for an open forum in which the interviewees could discuss their views on mentoring practices, in line with the interview approach of Sarantakos (2005). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with data obtained providing a comprehensive view of the respondent's voice, including personal stories, attitudes and opinions. Ethical approval was granted.

Data analysis

Wenger's (1998) theory on learning, meaning and identity provides the primary analytic lens. The data-set was analysed to identify episodes involving Wenger's concepts of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. The data were reviewed through a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) strategy of 'categorization – where the meaning of long interview statements is reduced to a few simple categories' was used to informed categories and themes (p. 203). Using Kwan and Lopez-Real's (2010) methods, a full transcript was read three times, and data relating to the Wenger's (1998) three interrelated concepts of social learning were extracted as broad themes to illustrate the important aspect of mentoring occurring for participants. This data extraction was conducted independently by the two authors, then compared and revised for agreement.

Results

The data relating to the categories were grouped together under broad themes: mentoring relationship; mentoring processes; and guiding practices. These themes (see Table 1) were closely aligned with the three interrelated concepts identified by Wenger (1998).

The following quotations from the data illustrate the importance of conversation in enabling mentoring according to Wenger's (1998) three concepts.

(1) The mentoring relationship and mutual engagement

The mentoring relationship was a crucial component of Wenger's (1998) concept of mutual engagement. The results indicated that the use of professional conversations for

Table 1. Identified categories aligned with Wenger's (1998) concepts.

| Participant group | Key categories | Themes | Wenger's (1998) three concepts |
|---|--|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Pre-service teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support, guidance, respect, honesty • Sharing ideas, beliefs • Positive feedback | Mentoring relationship | Mutual engagement |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborations and professional relationships • Opportunity to develop professional identity • Being welcomed and introduced • Opportunities to talk through experiences • Clarified expectations, responsibilities • Acceptance and recognition • Extra curricula involvement | Mentoring processes | Joint enterprise |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate essential skills and attitudes – presumed and desirable • Reflective thinking and sharing • Opportunities to experiment • Scaffolded, instructional guidance • Guided feedback | Guiding practice | Shared repertoire |
| Supervising Teacher and School-Based Co-ordinator | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing ideas and beliefs • Open and honest dialogue | Mentoring relationship | Mutual engagement |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Multiple relationships • Professional relationship, honesty, respect • Explicit role for supervising teacher: selection, monitoring, support, mentoring of new supervising teachers • Creating links between theory and practice • Strengthened partnership • Sharing expectations • Outlining roles and processes • Involvement in wider school community • Welcome, support, information, trouble shooter, problem solver | Mentoring processes | Joint enterprise |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline expectations • Essential skills and attitudes – presumed and desirable • Mentoring pathways • Reflective practices • Specific, timely feedback | Guiding practice | Shared repertoire |

sharing ideas created important opportunities for building relationships and supported collaboration and mutual sharing of understandings within the school context.

The pre-service teachers believed a positive mentor relationship was fundamental to engaging in genuine conversations and demonstrating competence as a teacher. The relationship needed to be nurturing, professional and collaborative, with honest conversations. Positive support and working together on difficult issues increased the pre-service teachers' self-esteem and led to conversations that promoted better understanding of teaching pressures. This enabled the pre-service teacher to feel supported and guided in the relationship, to develop confidence with teaching and in sharing beliefs about teaching:

I and my mentor [*sic*] built a strong, open professional relationship. They [*sic*] were honest and constructive in what I could improve – always emphasising the positive 'This working really well in your lesson' ... 'Think about this strategy next time.' (PST #2)²

Where conversation was difficult, the relationship and self-esteem suffered with little shared practice or beliefs: 'My mentor would never include me in conversations. The staff room would stop talking as soon as I entered ... I was not accepted or respected (PST #1).'

The importance of shared practice was identified by one supervising teacher who explained the positive results achieved through co-teaching with her mentee:

I think it's a fantastic opportunity for her to take my Year 12 classes. We could team teach, if she [*sic*] wanted. I'll be there with her so there's not a problem.

... we planned it out to see what they're doing and how I could help (ST #7)³

The mentors recognised the importance of a sound working relationship that was characterised by behaviour that was ethical, collegial and trusting. It was important that both parties felt comfortable asking questions, seeking advice and agreeing on how to work through negative situations:

I had developed so much as a teacher and no longer relied upon her to 'step in' when required. She helped me build the confidence that I now have to enter into the profession and feel well equipped to become a quality educator. (PST # 5)

The results confirm that when the pre-service teachers felt they were well supported, were given positive support and provided with the opportunity for genuine conversations, then the practicums were more successful for both parties.

(2) Mentoring processes that progress the joint enterprise

Mentoring processes that progressed the concept of joint enterprise were essential to support the pre-service teachers in feeling accepted into the social world of the school, making them feel like a 'teacher' rather than a student. This involved the pre-service teachers being offered the opportunity to engage in genuine conversations about their practice with mentors and others in the school. A successful mentor was one who could orchestrate this progression from student-teacher to graduate teacher.

However, reflective conversations that became more about compliance, competence and survival, rather than sharing awareness, tended to be less effective for learning. Reflection was valued by the mentor as an integral part of each lesson and a long term strategy for guiding the pre-service teacher's development.

Shared reflective conversations allowed opportunity for personal frameworks to be made visible, challenged and explored. In some schools, mentoring began with being welcomed and introduced to staff and students. This fostered feelings of respect, and helped the pre-service teachers settle into the role of teacher, and encouraged them to feel part of the school.

I was welcomed and supported. I was given access to a multitude of resources from both the school and from other teachers for my own personal work. My supervisor encouraged me to find my own style and identity and to take chances, while always giving me advice and feedback ... (PST #6)

Some schools saw the practicum as a part of their community of practice where all participants learn from each other, and encouraged the pre-service teachers to become involved in as many facets of school life as possible. One mentor explained the rationale thus:

We ask them to get involved with everything that we do from lunchtime duties to visits to the boarding house, to helping with marking. Just a real sample of what it is to be a teacher because ... it is so important, they understand everything that a teacher does, the whole system, how it works and the idea that we work collegially. (ST #7)

The pre-service teachers were pleased when they were treated as professionals and given appropriate opportunity to share their ideas and experiences and negotiate their teaching. Acceptance enhanced their self-confidence, motivation and professional identity. Where pre-service students felt poorly treated, confidence in teaching was reduced.

The need for awareness of cultural diversity concerns both the host school as well as the pre-service teacher. Language was not necessarily a barrier to communication, though sensitivity to use of a language other than English was important for feeling professionally comfortable with social interactions. Being able to engage in shared conversations was important for establishing contextual understanding. Some pre-service teachers were placed in schools that were very different from their own cultural background and schooling experiences; this led to cultural and language barriers. For example, one student related that s/he was called ‘... arrogant for asking questions and trying to relate it to my own cultural background’ (PST #3). In instances like this, they found it difficult to ‘feel’ engaged as a teacher.

(3) Guiding teaching practice through shared repertoire

Instrumental in guiding practice for the pre-service teacher was developing the shared repertoire of language, routines, stories and tools. This was developed through ongoing, two-way conversations that provided guidance and feedback, and was recognised as complex, individual and dynamic. Pre-service teachers needed to build their skills towards the same competencies and understandings of teaching as the experienced teachers.

During the practicum, the pre-service teacher looked for guidance on expectations, time management, behaviour management, class dynamics, student background and help in moving from daily lesson plans to long-term planning:

My supervisor had a broad knowledge of the school, the students and the school. She filled me in on the individual needs of students, the needs of the entire class ... This helped me greatly in terms of building rapport with my classes and helped me to deliver lessons. (PST # 6)

The pre-service teachers did not refer to being required to have specific knowledge or be given specific support or guided reflection, but rather to being given freedom and support to experiment:

[My mentor] ... gave [me] a lot of freedom in regards [*sic*] to how I would choose to teach the students, and would then provide feedback ... to what should be changed and what should or not be done in the future. [He] helped me to establish a system that worked with the students. (PST #4)

The supervising teachers identified the significance of improving practice through feedback and discussion. They saw the need to provide the opportunity for the pre-service teacher to talk about classroom practice. They wanted to guide the pre-service teacher in a positive way: ‘I try and talk about things they’ve done well and then highlight areas that they may improve. I would never spend the whole time discussing ... problems’ (ST #7).

However, where a mentor had a ‘cloning’ controlling approach, the pre-service teacher’s identity was inhibited from developing and relationships became fractured: ‘[He] really took away my confidence. [He] had unrealistic expectations. [He] told me to design a unit of work, then told me I had to teach his ideas instead of my own’ (PST # 1).

Having been denied the chance to experiment or discuss teaching ideas was viewed by the pre-service teachers as frustrating, disappointing and limiting in the development of their own teacher practice. Conversations that involved sharing practice and beliefs were important for developing practice and confidence in the classroom.

Discussion

In response to the research question about the most important aspects of practicum mentoring, the issues the participants identified aligned closely with Wenger’s three interrelated

concepts: mutual engagement; joint enterprise; and shared repertoire. Wenger viewed these concepts as necessary to maximise social learning during mentoring. This paper argues that conversations are the important enabler within each of Wenger's (1998) interrelated concepts, with genuine conversations optimising successful learning in mentoring during the practicum. In this context, 'genuine conversation' is defined as those conversations where the partners are equal rather than one person leading (Gadamer, 2004).

Conversations that occurred between the mentee, mentor and others in the school provided opportunities to talk through experiences, to share expectations, and to negotiate responsibilities, thus contributing to feelings of acceptance and recognition for pre-service teachers. Openness in the mentoring conversation was viewed as the critical distinction between 'authentic and inauthentic dialogue' (Gadamer, 2004, p. 356). Current literature identifies this as most important in successful teacher mentoring and teacher learning (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Bullough, 2005; Hudson, 2013; Jones & Brown, 2011; Margolis, 2007).

Conversations that supported collaborative reflection practices helped the pre-service teacher to make learning experiences meaningful by providing opportunity for shared insights into their own developing abilities and the practices of the mentor. Shared conversations enabled the mentor to guide the learning of and practice for the pre-service teacher.

Mutual engagement: conversations that establish norms and build relationships

Our research identified the mentoring relationship as the act of mutual engagement that occurs between the mentor and mentee. Shared conversations were most important for engagement, developing trust and reciprocal commitment (Bloomfield, 2010; Hastings, 2004). For the pre-service teacher, positive relationships involved sharing of teaching ideas, mutual respect and honesty. Genuine conversations played an important role in building mutual trust needed for the development of teacher identity, a crucial factor in developing feelings of competence, well-being and success (Hascher et al., 2007; Sim, 2006; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

Shared genuine conversations led to the social binding of the pre-service teachers and feelings of acceptance in the school. For the pre-service teachers, having a mentor who spent time sharing ideas, discussing and encouraging experimentation was important to their developing identity and practice as a teacher. Successful conversations meant there was a common truth where mentor and mentee were bound together within the school community (Gadamer, 2004).

When positive conversations existed in the relationship, the pre-service teacher was able to gain a deeper understanding of the complex, emotional and demanding aspects of being a teacher; this reduced stress and anxiety (Danyluk, 2013). The pre-service teachers wanted conversation that provided positive feedback and specific ideas on how to improve their teaching. They wanted conversations where they could share their goals and their own ideas on teaching, as well as a collegial, co-collaborative relationship with respectful, open dialogue.

Conversations that created opportunities for pre-service teachers to make essential connections between their personal learning, prior understandings, current experiences and their mentors' expectations, are key to learning to teach, as identified by Ambrosetti et al. (2014) and Rogers and Raither-Roth (2006). Clear expectations support growth by helping

the pre-service teacher to form a clear self-image of who they are as a teacher (Kagan, 1992). Ultimately, the pre-service teacher wanted to be treated 'like a teacher' and actively engaged in shared dialogue, planning and teaching.

Joint enterprise: conversations that create shared understandings

Our research identified the theme 'mentoring process' as a series of activities and accompanying conversations that helped create a shared understanding of teaching for the mentor and mentee. This started with the welcome and the introduction to the school; it included conversations around expectations, respective roles and opportunity to negotiate teaching requirements.

The pre-service teachers' self-esteem and confidence were directly linked to their experiences and opportunities to speak frankly about their experiences with their mentor. In this research, many of the mentors had assumed that all pre-service teachers would be confident, creative and competent with subject content skills. However, the pre-service teachers were often unclear on what was expected and often needed tight support and explicit directions to learn how to teach in order for them to survive the day-to-day classroom.

For the mentors, conversations were viewed as essential in articulating their expectations in their subject and offered opportunity to deconstruct possible misconceptions. Genuine discussions led to surprise learning for both mentor and mentee and an elevation of conversations, providing enrichment of learning for the pre-service teacher (Gadamer, 2004). According to Achinstein and Davis (2014), conversations were particularly important when mentoring subject knowledge within practice, providing understanding of how to teach specific subject content and supporting the process of moving the mentee from novice to autonomous teacher.

Wenger (1998) refers to this learning as belonging, the social configuration in which enterprise is defined and participation is recognisable. The pre-service teachers wanted to be supported but also wanted to share their own experiences, thus gradually becoming autonomous. For the pre-service teachers, professional acceptance was not automatic. For those who were treated poorly, or excluded from conversations, their confidence was greatly diminished. Being accepted by the school community and welcomed into the profession was often played out in conversation and imparted legitimacy to the pre-service teacher's developing teacher identity, as they judged themselves based on the qualities implied by the mentor and the school membership (Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2009). For the mentor, conversations provided the opportunity to actively create links for the pre-service teacher between what they were doing at university and the classroom.

Teaching was not context-free and to analyse teaching was sophisticated and complex work; genuine conversations that explored the cultural context of the school were crucial for pre-service teachers' understanding of teaching practice. Having the mentor share insights into the school context and their classroom helped the pre-service teacher to reflect upon their own teaching performance, allowing personal frameworks to be challenged and explored.

Shared repertoire: conversations that shared resources and guided practice

Critical to the shared repertoire were the genuine conversations that included understanding the language of the school, the school routines and school practices. Wenger and Snyder

(2000, p. 229) states that to 'be competent is to be engaged with the community and to be a trusted partner in interactions'. The research exemplified how a mentor's words can either inspire or dishearten the pre-service teachers' contribution, partnership and even their entry into the profession (Keogh et al., 2006). Feeling part of the professional community encompasses both personal and professional dimensions according to Beauchamp and Thomas (2010).

For the mentor, shared repertoire included having explicit conversations on their expectations, and making visible (via dialogue and modelling) the essential skills and attitudes desirable for a professional teacher. It was important for the pre-service teacher to understand themselves as a teacher in relation to other teachers in the school (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In this research, the pre-service teacher found expectations were often overshadowed by issues of survival in the classroom; reflective conversations were needed in order for the pre-service teacher to be able to deconstruct/articulate their practice. Frequently, there was a disconnection between the pre-service teachers' needs and the ways in which the mentoring practice was undertaken and conducted. Shared conversations helped the mentor to address differing expectations, as well creating an opportunity for sharing personal insights, and encouraging the mentee in critical self reflection (Senese, 2007; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012).

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the small number of participants. However, the background research was conducted over a two-year span, and during the interviewing period the researchers established rapport with participants. Their accounts can lack validity or credibility for various reasons; for example, the concept of social desirability may have led some participants to represent their experiences or themselves in a favourable light, but in general the comments were detailed, frank and honest. A larger study would increase the reliability of the results.

It would also be useful to gather more data on the actual conversations that are taking place during mentoring. A new study might examine and characterise the knowledge and understandings that supervising teachers use in their work in mentoring pre-service teachers.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the important role of genuine conversations in the mentoring relationship. Genuine conversations are crucial in optimising success in learning to teach and in navigating the social world of schools. This study identifies mentoring processes and guiding practices needed to accompany the genuine conversations in line with Wenger's (1998) identified need for social configuration for learning and teacher autonomy. This study offers several recommendations to improve the support of pre-service teachers in order to lead to successful practicum experiences. Genuine conversations play important roles in both influencing the pre-service teachers' understanding of the work of teaching and the development of pre-service teachers' identity. Most studies in mentoring have recognised the importance of the mentoring process (Crasborn et al., 2011), of perceptions (Orland-Barak & Klien, 2005) and of guiding learning (Strong & Baron, 2004).

However, none of these studies has looked at the role of genuine conversations within Wenger's three interrelated concepts as way of improving mentoring.

This study explored how conversations were a crucial enabler in good mentoring, particularly in the development of a shared understanding of teaching. It recommends ongoing support for pre-service teachers and mentors in establishing and maintaining genuine conversations in the complexity of the practicum.

The recommendations suggest that more attention is required to both the placement of pre-service teachers and relevant mentor training. Emotional dilemmas and professional acceptance are often played out through the conversations – or lack thereof – during the practicum and can enhance – or undermine – the pre-service teacher's self-esteem and identity.

We consider it is important for the pre-service teacher to be involved in early conversations, pre-school visits, school induction and classroom observation to familiarise themselves with students, school expectations and norms of practice. This recommendation could be advanced by a close partnership between the practicum schools and universities.

In addition, schools should be encouraged to identify and develop a pool of teachers best suited to mentoring. The requirements of the mentor include advanced skills in teaching, observation, cultural awareness and maintaining genuine conversations to support working collaboratively. It is important that future teachers enter the profession with quality practice, collaborative skills and the ability to articulate the language of the profession.

While some may consider that conversations between mentor and mentee during practicum as commonplace and a normal part of the mentoring process, this study has shown they are very complex and profound, closely tied to relationships, personal beliefs and expectations. Metacognitive conversations help establish trust in the relationship and support the pre-service teachers in developing their teacher identity. Genuine conversations are fundamental to the successful mentoring of pre-service teachers.

Notes

1. Postgraduate programmes required to complete 60 days for practicum and 80 days for undergraduate programmes.
2. Pre-service teacher (PST).
3. Supervising Teacher (ST).

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