"First Meetings": Constructive first encounters between pre-service teachers and their mentors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th>International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>IJMCE-10-2019-0096.R4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Research Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>mentoring, Pre-service Teacher Education, mentor, professional conversations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"First Meetings": Constructive first encounters between pre-service teachers and their mentors

Structured Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to report the findings from an action research project in which the researchers sought to develop a set of questions for use by mentors (experienced teachers) and mentees (pre-service teachers) on a course of initial teacher education (ITE) when they first met – the "initial encounter".

**Design Methodology/Approach:** The researchers used an action research approach to address the lower retention rate of pre-service teachers from different backgrounds, such as Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), and the issues around mentoring which may exacerbate this problem. Discussions between the course team and participating mentors and mentees suggested that the initial encounter between mentor and mentee was significant, and an action research methodology would allow for developing questions that might structure such encounters.

**Findings:** The researchers found that a useful and effective set of questions could be developed and used by mentors and mentees. Additionally, this process gave researchers insights into the nature of the first encounters between mentors and mentees on an ITE course and how both groups see their roles. In several cycles of action research, the participants produced a number of iterations of such questions, which were refined across a two-year period.

**Research Limitations/Implications:** While it is too early to tell if the issues leading to the lower retention rate of pre-service teachers that prompted the project have been reduced in any significant way, the researchers suggest that thinking about these initial encounters can impact the way a mentor and mentee goes on to build a relationship.
Originality/Value: The authors found very little research in the field of teacher education which looks at initial encounters between mentors and mentees and thus make an original contribution to the mentoring literature.

Keywords

Mentor, pre-service teacher, mentoring, professional conversations
Introduction: The Context to the Project

In the UK, as in many other parts of the world, teacher recruitment and retention have been at a persistently low level for the last decade (Foster, 2019). Schools, universities and the government have attempted, and continue to attempt, a wide range of strategies to address this shortage of teachers. Furthermore, a high number of those who do qualify as teachers leave after a relatively short period in the profession (Allen et al., 2016). The academics involved in this study teach a course of initial teacher education (ITE) – in this case a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – which prepares university graduates to teach in secondary education. We, the course team delivering this PGCE, noted that a number of different circumstances were, in our opinion, coinciding to create conditions which caused some individuals and groups to become disillusioned with, and discomfited by, the prospect of entering the profession. Institutional self-evaluation data, submitted by our university to the UK government, suggested that the problem of teacher retention was particularly acute amongst certain types of pre-service teachers, most notably older trainees, male trainees and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) trainees. This view was confirmed by UK Department for Education (DFE) data on recruitment and retention (Allen et al., 2016). With this in mind, our course team began to discuss on a regular basis why these types struggled to achieve good outcomes on the course. In these discussions, one thing that arose persistently was the relationship between the pre-service teacher – often referred to as the mentee – and the mentor assigned to supervise them through the in-school element of their course of ITE. Debate about the nature of this relationship is not new; indeed, it has preoccupied academics involved in ITE for a number of decades (Arthur et al., 1997; Butterfield et al., 1999). One of our colleagues responsible for management of student placement began to analyse this relationship in our setting in more depth (Marshall, 2018).

She discerned that so much seemed to depend on the first meeting between the mentee and the mentor and the conditions under which this took place. As a group of former teachers and mentors ourselves, we questioned whether there were specific things that we might say
to trainees during these first meetings, and subsequently, amongst ourselves we generated a list of questions that we had asked trainees when we were in the mentoring role. Further discussion led to the idea that we might test these questions to see if our current mentor group agreed they were appropriate questions to ask during a first meeting. Consequently, the idea of an action research project in which mentors generated and tested sets of questions was born, with the intended outcome being that the project would produce a useable set of questions that mentors could select from to organise the content of their first sit-down meeting with their mentees.

The conception of mentoring used here is quite specific. It refers to the development of pre-service teachers in an ITE model, and we are aware of the argument that this model is more about coaching than mentoring. As Clutterbuck and Megginson (2006) point out, coaching is often associated with “improved performance (often over the short term) in a specific skills area”, while mentoring is often seen as being about “the identification and nurturing of potential for the whole person” (pp. 4–6). They also suggest that mentors have wider responsibilities beyond coaching-improved performances, such as exposing their mentees to other professional networks and acting more like a role model. ITE, in the UK at least, tends to combine both coach and mentor role into a sort of master–apprentice model, in which the mentee must reach a certain level of performativity but also must look to the mentor for wider aspects of their professional development. It is helpful to see these pre-service teachers – and, by association, their mentors – as being in Kram’s (1983) initiation stage of the mentoring relationship. We refer to them here as “trainees” or, in line with the internationally recognised term, “pre-service teacher”. We also use the term “mentee” to describe these trainees within the terms of their relationship with a mentor.

This kind of mentor and mentee model, which in the UK has been standardised through a set of national criteria (DFE, 2011) has its critics; however, we felt that such arguments were not really within the scope of this paper. The course team and trainees, though, are to some extent compelled to work within this model, and so the action research project was an...
attempt to acknowledge that a flexibility of approach was required. The development of a set of questions which could be used in these “first meetings” offered a possible way of exploring the idea that there is not actually a “one-size-fits-all” way of mentoring trainee teachers, despite the fact that national standards might suggest otherwise.

This article outlines and discusses the findings of the aforementioned action research project and seeks to discuss the data generated in both empirical and theoretical terms, with an emphasis on the notion that first meetings between mentors and mentees (and the questions asked therein) might in some small way create a more constructive relationship and, further down the line, help to attenuate retention problems.

**Literature Background (or Review)**

While the action research project under discussion here focused specifically on the first meetings and relationships that took place between pre-service teachers and their mentors, we have chosen to take a slightly wider view of the literature, which refers, additionally, to the mentor–mentee relationships that exist for teachers who are also post qualification. This is because we believe that there are many similarities in the development of these relationships, and the establishment of good practices in the pre-service period serves mentors and mentees well later on.

As a consequence, relevant literature to the project can broadly be grouped under three key headings: (1) the general importance of the mentoring relationship, (2) the importance of conversations to the process of mentoring and (3) mentees’ experiences in the pre-service phase, particularly where this concerns specific groups of pre-service or early-career teachers who are subsequently at risk of “dropping out” of the training programme or the teaching profession.

The literature concerning the significance of the mentoring relationship (both globally and locally in the UK) is substantial (Arthur et al., 1997; Butterfield et al., 1999) and has a long history. It is worth noting from the outset, however, that American perspectives on teacher
education tend to focus on the process of teacher induction as a whole, while the notion of a mentor, and the importance of that person’s relationship to a mentee as a trainee teacher, is perhaps more prevalent in European literature. While space does not permit a detailed analysis here, two sources in particular (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Wang et al., 2008) give a good overview of the former American perspective. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggest that empirical evidence supports the notion that strong induction processes result in positive outcomes in three key areas: teacher retention, pedagogical practices and student achievement. Wang et al.’s (2008) literature review examines whether there is a connection between things like the induction process and teaching practice. The study concludes that there has been insufficient research into the effect of mentoring and induction on trainee outcomes. The kind of study described in the current paper provides some such research, which surveyed both trainees and their mentors to “help program designers develop effective structures for teacher induction, especially in those programs that are expected in learning to teach” (Wang et al., 2008, p. 147), to support trainee teachers. Both sets of authors acknowledge that mentoring is a significant part of the induction process, and their work considers a range of literature and empirical evidence which demonstrates the importance of the relationships involved.

The European literature tends to focus on the mentoring process more specifically, particularly in that literature which refers to both the importance of conversations in the process of mentoring and mentees’ experiences in the pre-service phase. However, for an account of the significance of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee and its centrality to teacher development, Hobson et al. (2009) give some compelling explanations. This review of the literature on mentoring relationships suggests a number of key factors will determine their success. These include mentor selection and pairing, mentoring strategies and mentor preparation (Hobson et al., 2009, pp. 211–212). We suggest that the outcomes of this action research project constitute both a strategy to be adopted by mentors and an aspect of mentor preparation. The questions generated by the project are not only a means
of making a positive start to the mentor–mentee relationship, but also, we argue, essential for the establishment of its ongoing success.

With regard to the importance of mentoring conversations, the aim of this project was to provide a structure for the first formal conversation held between the mentor and mentees in our course partnership during the initial encounter. The wider literature on the importance of dialogue to the mentoring process does offer some insight here. While there are no studies on initial encounters specifically, there a number which explore the nature and purpose of mentor–mentee dialogue. Good overviews of this area of research are provided by Hennissen et al., (2008) and Crasborn et al. (2011), while Tillema and Van Esch (2015, pp. 117–223) devote a substantial section of their book “Mentoring for Learning” to mentoring conversations. However, a number of specific themes do occur in the literature which are particularly relevant to this study. A number of authors, for example, focus on the post-lesson observation discussion (Kim and Silver, 2016; Svojanovsky, 2017) and the impact that management of this discussion has on teacher development. There is also quite a strong thread of language and discourse analysis in both these and other studies looking at mentor–mentee dialogue. Tillema and Van Esch’s (2015) empirical study looked at the kinds of speech acts that occur in mentoring conversations in order to establish what kinds of mentee learning has taken place. They conclude that critical analysis of these speech acts is a vital part of the development of the mentor–mentee relationship. Haneda et al. (2019) consider the social interactions in the kind of coaching relationship which often characterises the way mentors see their role. Similarly, Crasborn et al., (2011) reflect upon the idea that there might be multiple types of mentor roles, and that there is no single approach guaranteed to produce success. Finally, there is some discussion of the kinds of topic that are discussed in these dialogues, ranging from subject knowledge (Douglas, 2014) to assessment (Butterfield et al., 1999).
Types of trainees at risk

In our research, we focused on improving the likelihood that a mentee would compete the course, but completion rates can be affected by diversity within a cohort. Groups of individuals who are at risk of dropping out of training, or failing to take up employment in teaching, occupy a somewhat problematic place in the literature, which requires careful analysis. For example, there is quite a large body of work around the recruitment and retention of male teachers (e.g. Cushman 2005, 2008; Lahelma, 2000), and this is summarised eloquently by Pollitt and Oldfield (2017). However, this tends to focus on recruitment to primary school vacancies where, historically, there has been significant difficulty in recruiting male trainees. A similarly significant body of literature looks at retention of teachers, rather than trainees, in general terms; successive administrations in the UK have thought there was enough of a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention to commission independent research on the matter (Cater, 2017; Education Policy Institute [EPI], 2017). Largely, this research and inquiry identify issues such as workload, the inspection regime, accountability and risk as reasons for leaving the profession or not joining it in the first place, (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017) but does not say very much about these people’s experiences of either applying to, or joining, a course of ITE. There is, as John Howson says, a need to make a distinction between “recruitment into training. … and recruitment into employment” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017, p. 29), and in terms of the former, much of the policy, both research-informed and otherwise, gives little consideration to the question of how specific groups of pre-service teachers respond to the challenges of ITE. In addition to the Commons Briefing Paper cited above (Foster, 2019), academics at the Education Datalab in the UK suggest, from an analysis of the odds ratio of different demographics of pre-service teachers, that some specific groups are at risk of not reaching employment after training (Allen et al, 2016). Odds ratios are a way of presenting the relationship between the risk of something happening and it actually happening. If an odds ratio is less than 1, the likelihood of that eventuality is decreased. If it is more than 1, the likelihood is increased.
For example, the odds ratio of BAME trainees remaining in the profession for two years and three months post qualification is 0.69. This is in stark contrast to the odds ratio for female trainees remaining in the profession for a similar length of time (1.39). For trainees in South West England, this figure is 0.84, which compares unfavourably with an area like the East Midlands where the odds ratio is 1.22. (Allen et al., 2016). While the authors are careful to point out that readers should not over-emphasise small ratio differences, clear patterns in recruitment and retention do emerge from the national data.

Interestingly, though, there is some literature globally which addresses the problems of recruiting and retaining pre-service and early-career teachers from diverse backgrounds. This literature mainly originates in the US, where concerns about the recruitment and retention of BAME trainees stretches back more than 25 years (King, 1993). As a consequence, researchers have made concerted attempts to suggest solutions. For example, the idea that ITE programmes for pre-service teachers from diverse backgrounds need to be tailored to give opportunities to reflect on their own cultural identities is one that a number of sources put forward (e.g. Amos, 2010; Au and Blake, 2003), and indeed, in the US there appears to be an active move by researchers to propose specific points in ITE where the intersection of race and gender seems to cause particular problems (Vasquez, 2019). Consequently, then, we see the outcomes of the action research project described herein as a possible means of identifying a specific point (the initial encounter between mentor and mentee) from which a more structured approach can be developed to enable diversity to be better catered for.

The idea that the first meeting between mentor and mentee might be one of the most important encounters is largely absent within this literature. As a consequence, the researchers of the project hope to go some way to addressing this absence.
Theoretical Frameworks

The action research project described here is grounded in two related theoretical frameworks. The first of these is Lave and Wenger’s (1991) “communities of practice”, which seeks to characterise professional learning as a socialisation process by which the new professional is inducted into existing practices and beliefs. Within this model, inductees are seen as participating “legitimately” by offering new perspectives on the professional practice at hand from what Lave and Wenger term the “periphery”. These kinds of “legitimate peripheral participation” offer the opportunities to interrogate, innovate and complement existing practice, and the questions devised to structure the “first meetings” described here are seen as a means of facilitating such participation. Equally important here, though, are Lave and Wenger’s ideas about apprenticeship, which is one way of seeing the mentor and mentee relationship. For Lave and Wenger, the apprentice is someone who is a newcomer to a community of practice and is attempting to participate in it legitimately. The apprentice is not taught explicitly but rather learns through participation in the community’s activity. Such participation develops their identity as a member of the community and marks their transition from apprentice to master. Lave and Wenger are clear that such transitions can cause conflict, particularly when masters withhold knowledge from apprentices on the grounds that they think they “should be instructed, rather than as peripheral participants in the community” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 76). We see a parallel here for this project. One of our initial conjectures (about the kinds of trainees who were at risk on our course) related to those who found themselves in a situation where their mentor would not let them participate in aspects of teaching until they had been instructed in the mentor’s preferred way of approaching those things. The “initial encounter” questions proposed here assist in opening a dialogue about the master–apprentice relationship which, we hope, promotes the mentee’s participation. However, the questions also involve the mentor in what Wenger (1998) later terms “brokering” the mentee to their professional community by establishing and addressing boundaries, conflicts of interest and practices.
This idea of apprenticeship is built upon by the work of Barbara Rogoff (1995) who sees personal development as occurring on three “planes” – the personal, the interpersonal and the community – and that there are three specific processes which facilitate this development: apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation. For Rogoff, each type of process corresponds to a plane. For example, the apprenticeship process facilitates development in the community plane, while participatory appropriation facilitates individuals taking part fully in whatever activity they are participating in and fulfilling personal development. While Rogoff is often talking about children in her work, many of the ideas she presents are relevant to the development of trainee teachers. The mentoring relationship is one that is designed to move towards participatory appropriation – the point at which the trainee fully “owns” what they do as a teacher and feels that being a teacher is part of their identity. However, we see the first meeting between mentor and mentee as a means of establishing a community plane of development within which the mentee develops as an apprentice. The questions developed in this action research project may be seen as a means of starting the process of brokering the mentee to the teaching community. We argue that if questions like those established by this research project for the initial encounter are not asked, there is little hope of genuine development for the trainee teacher. A trainee teacher cannot move towards participatory appropriation because without the knowledge acquired by asking these sorts of questions (established by this research project for the initial encounter), the mentor can have little idea where the trainee sits within the teaching community.

**Methodology**

The specific context in which this research took place suggested an action research project to be the most appropriate methodological approach, given that the project team wished to see if it was possible to develop an improved experience for the trainee through a personalised approach to the first meeting with the mentor and if such an approach would result in higher retention levels on the course.
Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) suggest that action research approaches begin with the idea that something needs to be improved, and a “field of action” is decided in which attempts to address that improvement are located. In this particular study, we knew two things: institutionally collected data suggested that we should be thinking about ways of helping individual students in groups known to be at risk of lower retention rates (e.g. Cushman, 2005, 2008; Lahelma, 2000) to stay on the course, and furthermore, the relationship between mentor and mentee would be a particular focus. This latter point was because a substantial number of students (during support meetings held to address their progress) bought it up. They often cited a negative initial encounter or, worse still, no formal initial encounter with their new mentor. As stated above, this phenomenon was documented by one of our colleagues (Marshall, 2018), and so we saw this initial encounter as our field of action in which retention issues might be addressed. The main research question here asked, “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter between mentors and mentees?”

Having looked at the institutional self-evaluation data from the course’s pre-service teachers, and our colleague’s analysis, we decided that team members would write down some questions they might expect mentors to ask in that initial encounter. We saw this question-generating activity in terms of Altrichter and Gstettner’s (1993) model of action research, effectively developing an action strategy before we knew what the nature of the problem was. The team members had all been mentors (and indeed, trainees) in similar contexts to the mentors and mentees we were working with on the course; consequently, the questions generated tended to be (a) questions we had asked ourselves when we were mentors, (b) questions we ourselves had heard other mentors ask or discuss and (c) questions trainees told us that they had been asked. This initial collection of questions (Figure 1) were, quite deliberately, not refined or rephrased in any way but rather left “unpolished” to elicit responses from active mentors who elected to be involved in focus groups (pre-service teachers were not involved in the focus groups) and later, both mentors and mentees
responding to a questionnaire. Both these data collection methods were used to refine the questions later on (see Findings section). We saw this decision as being a crucial part of the action research cycle in that, as Kemmis and Taggart (1992) suggest, we needed to acknowledge that our own language and framing of these questions might be two of the things that required change. We also accepted there would be certain questions asked at this sort of first meeting that would be of an operational rather than a strategic or philosophical nature. Zuber-Skerrit (1996) points out that this is a barrier that action research approaches often face, and as such, the team needed to be open to ways of incorporating operational concerns while at the same time being observant of the wider strategic desire to improve mentor–mentee relationships.

Once this first set of initial encounter questions had been devised, we assembled two focus groups of mentors to discuss them – one consisting of thirteen mentors and the other eight mentors. The mentors in the focus group were self-selecting, choosing to attend the focus group as part of the course development day for new and experienced mentors. All of these mentors worked in partner schools where pre-service teachers from our course were placed for practicum purposes. In each focus group, two members of the team discussed the origins of the first “unpolished” iteration of the questions and then asked the focus group to say what they thought of them and ways they might be developed to the advantage of the mentor–mentee relationship. This was, then, a participatory opportunity, which as Morrison (1998) indicates is a condition for successful action research, but perhaps more importantly, it was a chance to draw on what Heron and Reason (2008) term the “extended epistemology” of this wider group. The focus group was a data collection method which would allow us to do what McKernan (2013) terms a “methodologically eclectic” study typical of action research projects. The focus group responses were then taken and tabulated (see Figure 2) to revise the existing questions or add new ones. We took the mentor comments and suggestions as both adding new knowledge of the mentoring process and a welcome challenge to our own language and perspectives on mentoring, which allowed us to reflect more on the process.
The next stage of the action research cycle involved distributing the focus groups’ version of the questions – a second iteration - to mentors for them to use, along with a letter introducing the project and inviting both mentor and mentee to use the questions in their initial encounters. All pre-service teachers were allocated a mentor, and therefore all pairings would have an initial encounter and use this second iteration of questions to frame that initial encounter. Although only some of the pre-service teachers were from those identified as “at-risk” groups, all pre-service teachers participated in the project. This ensured that any pre-service teacher, regardless of their diversity or needs, would have their initial encounter structured by the questions developed as part of this project. This development marked a subtle growth from thinking purely about the at-risk groups we started with to something slightly more holistic. The project was not concerned with attempting to demarcate and group the large cohort into different groups. The project was looking at emerging an approach that would be suitable for any pre-service teacher when they first met their mentor in that initial encounter.

The project team wanted to assess the nature of how mentors and mentees were using the questions as part of this project and so devised an online questionnaire to better capture the range of approaches. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gain an idea of both the way the questions were used and how both mentor and mentee felt about the questions as they were formed in this second iteration. The questionnaire consisted of four closed questions with a range of possible answers and then a space in which the respondent could add further suggestions for questions which they thought might be asked in an initial meeting (the nature of the questionnaire is discussed in more detail in the Findings section below). This gave the research team an easily codable way of seeing how the questions were being used (Cohen et al., 2002). We wanted the questionnaire to tell us something about the extent to which the mentor and mentee saw the “first meeting” questions as an opportunity for providing a structure, improving dialogue and ultimately improving the effectiveness of the mentor–mentee relationship, which both the self-evaluation data and our own observations
had suggested were the key areas for development. As Ruel et al. (2016) note, well-structured questionnaires provide an opportunity to elicit opinions, beliefs and perceptions of respondents, and we were clear here that we wanted the respondents to feel free to express their opinions about the “first meeting” questions that we had devised.

The respondents’ questionnaire answers (n=45 and n=12) were subsequently used to refine the questions twice more. In this development process, mentors suggested subtle changes of wording to existing questions; some effectively repeated questions but in a more or less formal way, while others suggested brand new questions which had not been considered, and these were added into the new iterations. It is important to note that the questionnaire questions did not change in these two refinements – they asked the respondents to say what they thought about the opportunity for providing structure, improved dialogue and effectiveness given each different iteration of the “first meeting” questions. We see this as an example of Kember’s (2000) fine-tuning process so important to action research. The differences between these iterations of the questions are discussed below.

The fourth and final iteration (see Figure 3) was an important stopping off point, then, in the action research cycle. It was a tangible outcome designed as an attempt to arrest the number of male, older and BAME trainees dropping out of the course, but perhaps more importantly, it offered an opportunity for reflexivity in terms of both the way mentors and mentees established their relationships and the way an action research methodology made us, as a course team and our mentors, consider what might have been happening in these initial meetings. We see these phenomena as reflective of Bradbury’s (2015) observation that evidence in action research is both dialogic and emergent over time. The issuing and reissuing of the questionnaire, and the subsequent refinement of the questions for use in mentor meetings, allowed us as a course team to strengthen the community of mentors and pre-service teachers with whom we worked.
Each initial encounter can only happen once, and therefore, the project took advantage of the fact that two initial meetings happen to pre-service trainees on their one-year course. Over 18 months, three sets of mentors and their allocated pre-service teachers made use of iterations of these questions during their initial encounters. Finally, it is important to note that this research project received approval through the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Research in Education (IRED) at the University of Bedfordshire. All participants gave their informed consent voluntarily, and no participant has been identified individually in this account of the research, or any other.

Findings

The findings of the project are represented by the final questions generated and the resultant personalised approach to the initial meeting between mentor and mentee. This section of the paper focuses on telling the story of how the questions were developed. The first iteration (see Figure 1) generated by the course team, as set out in the Methodology section, is the starting point and clearly looks very different from the final iteration (see Figure 3).

Responses to the initial questions we generated through the focus groups and were generally characterised by a rephrasing of the original question into something more relevant and accessible – in the view of the mentors. It is worth noting that the composition of the focus group (entirely made up of mentors) may have resulted in responses that considered the questions largely from the mentor point of view, and this was a notable limitation to this part of the action research study. As a result of this, it was important to compare and contrast this data with that obtained through the questionnaire, which elicited responses from both mentors and trainees.
The sort of rephrasing suggested by the focus groups meant that some of the questions became more exploratory. For example, the question “What do you think you should be able to expect from me as your mentor?” was eventually rephrased as two different but equally important questions: “Have you been mentored before?” “Tell me about what went well and what could have been better?” This was after going through a number of suggested re-writes which ranged from “What do you need from me as your mentor?” to “How do you interpret the role of mentor?” This sort of discussion and rephrasing process illustrated both the diversity of approaches to mentoring and the types of questions that mentors asked and felt they should ask. All of the initial questions had a number of amendments suggested by the mentor group, and in some cases, we consolidated these into multiple re-wordings. The question “What are you most concerned about coming into this placement?” eventually morphed into two questions, one of which was actually about the kind of person that the trainee was and how this impacted their concerns (see Figure 3).

Insert Fig. 2 about here.

Some of the focus group responses did not involve rephrasing the questions at all but rather replacing them with tasks. One participant in the focus group suggested that trainees be asked to complete a prioritisation or in-tray task rather than asked the question “Would you describe yourself as responding to tasks in a spontaneous or organised way (or both)?” Similarly, a respondent in response to the question “Do you want time to write down what you want to discuss in our mentor meetings beforehand?” put forward the idea of the trainee bringing to the meeting an agenda of things they wanted to talk about. Interestingly, this did happen on the course but independently of this project and the “first meetings” research.

The second iteration of the questions, refined via the focus groups, was distributed to all mentors and trainees in our partnership for use in their initial meetings. This was accompanied by a questionnaire which, after establishing whether the respondent was a mentor or mentee, asked three simple questions:
• To what extent were the mentor/mentee questions used as the structure for the initial meeting with your new mentor/mentee?
• To what extent did the mentor/mentee questions provide a useful dialogue for an initial meeting between mentor and mentee?
• In principle, do the mentor/mentee questions have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of the mentor/mentee relationship?

Respondents were given a number of options to choose from when answering these questions; for example, for the second question, they could specify whether they thought the questions provided a “very useful”, “useful”, “somewhat useful” or “not useful” prompt for discussion.

These questions were asked twice – once after the distribution and use of the second iteration of “first meeting” questions and again after further modification into a third iteration. On each occasion, the majority of respondents responded positively (50% of respondents in the first survey and 60% in the second), using the questions as at least a starting point for the discussion, finding them at least “somewhat useful” and determining that they had at least “some potential” for enhancing the mentor–mentee relationship. These more quantifiable responses were accompanied by some qualitative ones as well, with respondents being given the opportunity to comment on the development of the questions through open-box questions on the questionnaire, which were as follows:

• Which questions would you add?
• In what ways would you change the mentor/mentee agenda questions?

After the second iteration, responses to the first of these broadly fell into three categories. First, there were suggestions for questions which helped mentees to identify goals and meet them, such as “What areas do you want to develop?” Second, a group of suggestions around pedagogy and teaching strategies emerged with a number of people putting forward questions such as “Which area of your teaching do you think requires the most support?”
Finally, some suggestions focused on making the meeting as open and honest as possible and ways this might be achieved.

Responses to the second question tended to fall into two categories, with the first suggesting improvements to the layout of the document and the second about the way the questions might facilitate (or not) a more open relationship between mentor and mentee. For example, one respondent suggested that there needed to be a “back-up” set of questions in case the relationship between mentor and mentee broke down. As there was an existing process for such a circumstance in our course documentation, we decided not to add this to the questions but instead re-emphasised it in our mentor development conference.

After the third iteration of the survey was distributed, fewer respondents chose to make suggestions in these “open boxes” (only four responses for each question as opposed to 14 and 15, respectively, in the first survey). One might speculate that this demonstrated an increased level of satisfaction with the questions, although this assumes that the respondents would choose to articulate anything with which they were dissatisfied. Again, a number of responses focused on pedagogy and how this might feature in the first meeting. As a result of these responses, pedagogy was an aspect that did feature in the final iteration.

The final iteration of questions (as featured in Figure 3) was, then, a collaborative piece of work, a result of our action research project in which we emphasised collaboration among university faculty, mentors, and mentees. These questions are now a key element of any initial encounter between any mentor and any pre-service teacher on any of our institutional teacher preparation courses.

Insert Fig. 3 about here.

Discussion

In this study, we set out by identifying an unstructured and unresearched part of a pre-service teacher’s experience: the initial encounter with their mentor. We set out to develop a
response to the question “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter
between mentors and mentees?” and through various iterations over several cycles of an
action research project, we produced a set of questions which are now used throughout our
institution’s portfolio of pre-service teacher education courses. We present these iterations of
the questions and the discussion that surrounds them as a way of developing two ideas
which come out of both the literature and the theoretical frameworks we have presented. To
return to our conceptual framework, it is first important to note that these questions establish
a means for trainees to engage in that legitimate peripheral participation which Lave and
Wenger see as an essential feature of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 40). Second,
Rogoff’s (1985) three processes of personal development (apprenticeship, guided
participation and participatory appropriation – but particularly apprenticeship) are, we argue,
facilitated, at least in introductory terms, by a discussion of these questions by mentor and
mentee.

Both the discussions of the questions by the participants in the project and their responses
to the survey questions indicated a willingness of the participants to consider the idea that
there should be a dialogue between mentor and mentee at first meeting. The fact that 50%
of respondents in the first survey and 60% in the second found the questions to be a useful
or very useful prompt to promote discussion suggests a need to have a specific agenda for
these types of first encounters. This also returns us to address Hobson et al.’s (2009)
concerns about mentor preparation. While we acknowledge that discussions are likely to
move away from the initial questions after a time, the initial questions offer a means by which
the trainee can be inducted into not only the life of the school, but also the community of
practice of which their mentor is part. As Tillema and Van Esch (2015) suggest, critical
awareness of this sort of discussion allows for professional learning. For example, questions
around pedagogy, curriculum and motivation become an entry point into a professional
dialogue, allowing the trainee to not only participate in that community of practice, but
perhaps to also add to its knowledge base. This dialogue marks a development in the
pedagogical practice of both the trainee and their pupils, which are both important elements of the mentor–mentee relationship identified in the literature (Ingersoll and Strong, 2008).

This dialogue also allows the trainees to establish themselves in relationship to that community as apprentices (in Rogoff’s terms) and begin to move towards guided participation and participatory appropriation.

We also note, however, that a small minority of respondents did not feel that the questions were appropriate for the task at hand or did not address the priorities of an initial meeting between mentor and mentee. In both the closed and open questions, some participants intimated that some mentors did not like the idea of an agenda or structured discussion at all, but rather wanted the dialogue to develop organically. We accept that for some experienced mentors, this may be a perfectly valid and achievable approach, but we also suggest that with an increasing number of inexperienced mentors – in the UK at least (Oberholzer, 2019) – there may be value in our final set of questions for some people on both sides of the relationship. This position on mentors’ part, that they “know” what questions to ask, also reinforces the assumptions that they may hold about the mentoring relationship and expectations (Searby, 2009). We also accept the possibility that some of the respondents may have had experience of mentoring in non-school contexts. We did not ask questions about this and suggest that researchers further identify such questions as something for inclusion if undertaking similar research.

It is also interesting to note how certain questions developed across the life of the project. In our initial discussions as a team, we did not specifically identify pedagogy as something the mentor might ask questions about (particularly in the first placement). Instead, we thought that it might form part of the discussion of a broader question about the trainees’ concerns going into the placement. What is particularly interesting is that we did not start to see “pedagogy” suggested as the possible basis for a question until halfway through the second cycle of action research. For example, none of the mentors in the initial focus group used it as a term, despite suggesting that many of the questions should focus on teaching. We
suggest that some of this movement was caused by what we see as the “background noise” of discussions about teaching that surface on the internet and social media. The “slow teaching” movement (Thom, 2018), free schools and neo-traditional philosophies of education (Watson, 2017) have all impacted what preoccupies teachers on a daily basis, and we see the development of this question as being about this influence.

These kinds of professional questions permit the mentee to begin to understand the way that their might facilitate development of their own identities as teachers. For Rogoff (1995), participatory appropriation is a “process of becoming” (p. 141); In other words, it is to do with becoming a certain kind of person and thinking about the way that the mentee views things like deadlines, communication with colleagues and professional boundaries. As a consequence, the professional dialogue that asking and answering the questions provoked enabled the mentee to establish how their mentor viewed these professional concerns at the same time. Additionally, we argue that until the mentor gets the mentee to answer the questions developed by our research (or, at least, ones like them) such as “Is there a particular pedagogical approach that you would like to develop in this placement?”, they cannot broker the mentee to their wider professional community. In effect, the trainee is stuck in a place where professional knowledge is being withheld from them. These “potentially asymmetrical relationships” as Kim and Silver (2015, p. 33) describe them, prevent professional learning from occurring. This is the importance of the questions, then; they allow both mentor and mentee to work out where they are in relationship to the community of practice. Furthermore, a “reciprocal validation” occurs in this first meeting. When the mentor asks the mentee about their experiences, attitudes and views, they are validating the mentee as a potential member of the community of practice while the mentee is getting an insight into the mentor’s professional knowledge and experience. We suggest this validation can be significant, particularly in a second placement, as trainees who have not perhaps had particularly good developmental experiences in their earlier placements can receive recognition for the things that they have done well through the initial encounter,
through questions such as “What would you describe as your strengths and weaknesses and how do you think they might help or hinder you on placement?” Anecdotally, we offer the example of one of our secondary physics trainees who was, prior to teaching, an electrical engineer. When he first met his first placement mentor and this was disclosed, the mentor gave him responsibility for teaching a Year 13 class on electromagnetism. This recognition that the trainee had stronger subject knowledge and real-world application of knowledge that could be beneficial to the class – established a positive working relationship for the trainee despite subsequent difficulties and challenges that he faced, which are essential for the development of a professional community (Douglas, 2014).

This reciprocal validation is essential, we suggest, for a successful mentor–mentee relationship to occur. The traditional approaches to mentoring outlined in the literature (mentor selection, pairing, preparation, dialogue, mentor types and roles) can only be developed if brokering and validation has taken place between the pre-service teacher and the mentor. Overall, one would hope that the normal mentoring process should move the mentee from Rogoff’s apprenticeship process through guided participation and on to participatory appropriation, but it clearly needs to start from this kind of structured initial encounter.

Conclusions

The “final” iteration of questions identified above should not, of course, be seen as final at all. As action researchers, we see such solutions as simply being waypoints on the route to further development. However, for the moment, this iteration is in use in our course placement handbook, and mentors and mentees have been using the questions to structure their first meetings for almost a year at the time of writing. While the project itself started by way of awareness of literature demonstrating that diversity on a course leads to variable retention rates, such as lower outcomes for BAME and male trainees who have changed career, it ended up being about the way that teacher educators can enhance the initial
encounter between all and any type of pre-service teacher and their mentor. Instead of trying to define the diversity, we have tried to define the point at which diversity matters – the initial encounter. It is also a way of at least addressing some important concerns and allowing for the brokering and validation processes that we have described to take place. It is important to emphasise that we do not see the questions as a replacement for a long-term sustainable model of mentoring outlined in the substantial literature concerning the matter. Rather, we see them as a support to these models and processes.

It is also important to emphasise that we see them working as part of a wider, pluralistic approach to teacher education (Bates et al., 2018) which seeks to avoid the idea that schools are monocultural. We hope to support the development of well-rounded, mobile trainees who can work anywhere, and the questions are one tool that can support this pluralistic approach. We hope, too, that other teacher educators who share this vision, whether based in universities or not, will feel able to use the questions themselves with their mentors and trainees and empower them to develop further. The problem of teacher recruitment and retention, particularly for the groups who may have been identified as being at risk of “dropping out” at the start of this article, is an issue for all teacher education courses, and we hope that these questions and the wider findings of this action research project will be a starting point in helping other teacher training providers to think about ways of addressing these issues. An early premise of this project was that the initial encounter was unstructured and there was no substantive literature that focused on this aspect. Yet what has emerged is practice whereby the trainee can now be better differentiated for due to the mentor having a sharper and more candid insight into the trainee’s prior experiences and current approaches to teaching. The project involved collating and distilling the expertise of hundreds of mentors and trainees and their experiences of several hundred “first encounters”. This means that many of the mentors who now use the questions as part of the institution’s approach to teacher education were involved in the project to produce the questions in an ongoing action research project. It has been insightful to enable a community
to focus on their own practice and answer that key question: “What questions should be
explored in the initial encounter between mentors and mentees?” What has emerged is a
collective answer, and that answer is now being used by the community itself to structure its
practice.

Reference List

Allen, R., Bibby, D., Parameshwaran, M. and Nye, P. (2016) Linking ITT and workforce data:
(Initial Teacher Training Performance Profiles and School Workforce Census).
National College of Teaching and Leadership/DFE

German social science?” Education Action Research, Vol1, No. 3, pp.329-360

Amos, Y.T (2010) “They Don’t Want to Get It!’Interaction between Minority and White Pre-
Service Teachers in a Multicultural Education Class”. Multicultural Education. 17(4),
pp.31-37


. Available at https://peerreviewededucationblog.com/2018/06/13/whatever-people-
(Accessed 12th June 2020)


dialogues about pupil assessment in initial teacher training”, Assessment in Education:
Principles, Policy and Practice, 6:2, pp.225-246

Report No. 95. Available at https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/04/27/whither-teacher-
education-training/ (Accessed 12th June 2020)

Heinemann.

Routledge.

dialogues” Teaching and Teacher Education, 27, pp.320-321


"First Meetings": Constructive first encounters between pre-service teachers and their mentors

Structured Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to report the findings from an action research project in which the researchers sought to develop a set of questions for use by mentors (experienced teachers) and mentees (pre-service teachers) on a course of initial teacher education (ITE) when they first met – the "initial encounter".

Design Methodology/Approach: The researchers used an action research approach to address the lower retention rate of pre-service teachers from different backgrounds, such as Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), and the issues around mentoring which may exacerbate this problem. Discussions between the course team and participating mentors and mentees suggested that the initial encounter between mentor and mentee was significant, and an action research methodology would allow for developing questions that might structure such encounters.

Findings: The researchers found that a useful and effective set of questions could be developed and used by mentors and mentees. Additionally, this process gave researchers insights into the nature of the first encounters between mentors and mentees on an ITE course and how both groups see their roles. In several cycles of action research, the participants produced a number of iterations of such questions, which were refined across a two-year period.

Research Limitations/Implications: While it is too early to tell if the issues leading to the lower retention rate of pre-service teachers that prompted the project have been reduced in any significant way, the researchers suggest that thinking about these initial encounters can impact the way a mentor and mentee goes on to build a relationship.
Originality/Value: The authors found very little research in the field of teacher education which looks at initial encounters between mentors and mentees and thus make an original contribution to the mentoring literature.

Keywords

Mentor, pre-service teacher, mentoring, professional conversations
Introduction: The Context to the Project

In the UK, as in many other parts of the world, teacher recruitment and retention have been at a persistently low level for the last decade (Foster, 2019). Schools, universities and the government have attempted, and continue to attempt, a wide range of strategies to address this shortage of teachers. Furthermore, a high number of those who do qualify as teachers leave after a relatively short period in the profession (Allen et al., 2016). The academics involved in this study teach a course of initial teacher education (ITE) – in this case a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – which prepares university graduates to teach in secondary education. We, the course team delivering this PGCE, noted that a number of different circumstances were, in our opinion, coinciding to create conditions which caused some individuals and groups to become disillusioned with, and discomfited by, the prospect of entering the profession. Institutional self-evaluation data, submitted by our university to the UK government, suggested that the problem of teacher retention was particularly acute amongst certain types of pre-service teachers, most notably older trainees, male trainees and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) trainees. This view was confirmed by UK Department for Education (DFE) data on recruitment and retention (Allen et al., 2016). With this in mind, our course team began to discuss on a regular basis why these types struggled to achieve good outcomes on the course. In these discussions, one thing that arose persistently was the relationship between the pre-service teacher – often referred to as the mentee – and the mentor assigned to supervise them through the in-school element of their course of ITE. Debate about the nature of this relationship is not new; indeed, it has preoccupied academics involved in ITE for a number of decades (Arthur et al., 1997; Butterfield et al., 1999). One of our colleagues responsible for management of student placement began to analyse this relationship in our setting in more depth (Marshall, 2018). She discerned that so much seemed to depend on the first meeting between the mentee and the mentor and the conditions under which this took place. As a group of former teachers and mentors ourselves, we questioned whether there were specific things that we might say...
to trainees during these first meetings, and subsequently, amongst ourselves we generated
a list of questions that we had asked trainees when we were in the mentoring role. Further
discussion led to the idea that we might test these questions to see if our current mentor
group agreed they were appropriate questions to ask during a first meeting. Consequently,
the idea of an action research project in which mentors generated and tested sets of
questions was born, with the intended outcome being that the project would produce a
useable set of questions that mentors could select from to organise the content of their first
sit-down meeting with their mentees.

The conception of mentoring used here is quite specific. It refers to the development of pre-
service teachers in an ITE model, and we are aware of the argument that this model is more
about coaching than mentoring. As Clutterbuck and Megginson (2006) point out, coaching is
often associated with “improved performance (often over the short term) in a specific skills
area”, while mentoring is often seen as being about “the identification and nurturing of
potential for the whole person” (pp. 4–6). They also suggest that mentors have wider
responsibilities beyond coaching-improved performances, such as exposing their mentees to
other professional networks and acting more like a role model. ITE, in the UK at least, tends
to combine both coach and mentor role into a sort of master–apprentice model, in which the
mentee must reach a certain level of performativity but also must look to the mentor for wider
aspects of their professional development. It is helpful to see these pre-service teachers –
and, by association, their mentors – as being in Kram’s (1983) initiation stage of the
mentoring relationship. We refer to them here as “trainees” or, in line with the internationally
recognised term, “pre-service teacher”. We also use the term “mentee” to describe these
trainees within the terms of their relationship with a mentor.

This kind of mentor and mentee model, which in the UK has been standardised through a
set of national criteria (DFE, 2011), has its critics; however, we felt that such arguments
were not really within the scope of this paper. The course team and trainees, though, are to
some extent compelled to work within this model, and so the action research project was an
attempt to acknowledge that a flexibility of approach was required. The development of a set of questions which could be used in these “first meetings” offered a possible way of exploring the idea that there is not actually a “one-size-fits-all” way of mentoring trainee teachers, despite the fact that national standards might suggest otherwise.

This article outlines and discusses the findings of the aforementioned action research project and seeks to discuss the data generated in both empirical and theoretical terms, with an emphasis on the notion that first meetings between mentors and mentees (and the questions asked therein) might in some small way create a more constructive relationship and, further down the line, help to attenuate retention problems.

**Literature Background (or Review)**

While the action research project under discussion here focused specifically on the first meetings and relationships that took place between pre-service teachers and their mentors, we have chosen to take a slightly wider view of the literature, which refers, additionally, to the mentor–mentee relationships that exist for teachers who are also post qualification. This is because we believe that there are many similarities in the development of these relationships, and the establishment of good practices in the pre-service period serves mentors and mentees well later on.

As a consequence, relevant literature to the project can broadly be grouped under three key headings: (1) the general importance of the mentoring relationship, (2) the importance of conversations to the process of mentoring and (3) mentees’ experiences in the pre-service phase, particularly where this concerns specific groups of pre-service or early-career teachers who are subsequently at risk of “dropping out” of the training programme or the teaching profession.

The literature concerning the significance of the mentoring relationship (both globally and locally in the UK) is substantial (Arthur *et al*., 1997; Butterfield *et al*., 1999) and has a long history. It is worth noting from the outset, however, that American perspectives on teacher
education tend to focus on the process of teacher induction as a whole, while the notion of a mentor, and the importance of that person’s relationship to a mentee as a trainee teacher, is perhaps more prevalent in European literature. While space does not permit a detailed analysis here, two sources in particular (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Wang et al., 2008) give a good overview of the former American perspective. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggest that empirical evidence supports the notion that strong induction processes result in positive outcomes in three key areas: teacher retention, pedagogical practices and student achievement. Wang et al.’s (2008) literature review examines whether there is a connection between things like the induction process and teaching practice. The study concludes that there has been insufficient research into the effect of mentoring and induction on trainee outcomes. The kind of study described in the current paper provides some such research, which surveyed both trainees and their mentors to “help program designers develop effective structures for teacher induction, especially in those programs that are expected in learning to teach” (Wang et al., 2008, p. 147), to support trainee teachers. Both sets of authors acknowledge that mentoring is a significant part of the induction process, and their work considers a range of literature and empirical evidence which demonstrates the importance of the relationships involved.

The European literature tends to focus on the mentoring process more specifically, particularly in that literature which refers to both the importance of conversations in the process of mentoring and mentees’ experiences in the pre-service phase. However, for an account of the significance of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee and its centrality to teacher development, Hobson et al. (2009) give some compelling explanations. This review of the literature on mentoring relationships suggests a number of key factors will determine their success. These include mentor selection and pairing, mentoring strategies and mentor preparation (Hobson et al., 2009, pp. 211–212). We suggest that the outcomes of this action research project constitute both a strategy to be adopted by mentors and an aspect of mentor preparation. The questions generated by the project are not only a means
of making a positive start to the mentor–mentee relationship, but also, we argue, essential
for the establishment of its ongoing success.

With regard to the importance of mentoring conversations, the aim of this project was to
provide a structure for the first formal conversation held between the mentor and mentees in
our course partnership during the initial encounter. The wider literature on the importance of
dialogue to the mentoring process does offer some insight here. While there are no studies
on initial encounters specifically, there a number which explore the nature and purpose of
mentor–mentee dialogue. Good overviews of this area of research are provided by
117–223) devote a substantial section of their book “Mentoring for Learning” to mentoring
conversations. However, a number of specific themes do occur in the literature which are
particularly relevant to this study. A number of authors, for example, focus on the post-
lesson observation discussion (Kim and Silver, 2016; Svojanovsky, 2017) and the impact
that management of this discussion has on teacher development. There is also quite a
strong thread of language and discourse analysis in both these and other studies looking at
mentor–mentee dialogue. Tillema and Van Esch’s (2015) empirical study looked at the kinds
of speech acts that occur in mentoring conversations in order to establish what kinds of
mentee learning has taken place. They conclude that critical analysis of these speech acts is
a vital part of the development of the mentor–mentee relationship. Haneda et al. (2019)
consider the social interactions in the kind of coaching relationship which often characterises
the way mentors see their role. Similarly, Crasborn et al., (2011) reflect upon the idea that
there might be multiple types of mentor roles, and that there is no single approach
guaranteed to produce success. Finally, there is some discussion of the kinds of topic that
are discussed in these dialogues, ranging from subject knowledge (Douglas, 2014) to
assessment (Butterfield et al., 1999).
Types of trainees at risk

In our research, we focused on improving the likelihood that a mentee would compete the course, but completion rates can be affected by diversity within a cohort. Groups of individuals who are at risk of dropping out of training, or failing to take up employment in teaching, occupy a somewhat problematic place in the literature, which requires careful analysis. For example, there is quite a large body of work around the recruitment and retention of male teachers (e.g. Cushman 2005, 2008; Lahelma, 2000), and this is summarised eloquently by Pollitt and Oldfield (2017). However, this tends to focus on recruitment to primary school vacancies where, historically, there has been significant difficulty in recruiting male trainees. A similarly significant body of literature looks at retention of teachers, rather than trainees, in general terms; successive administrations in the UK have thought there was enough of a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention to commission independent research on the matter (Cater, 2017; Education Policy Institute [EPI], 2017). Largely, this research and inquiry identify issues such as workload, the inspection regime, accountability and risk as reasons for leaving the profession or not joining it in the first place, (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017) but does not say very much about these people’s experiences of either applying to, or joining, a course of ITE. There is, as John Howson says, a need to make a distinction between “recruitment into training. … and recruitment into employment” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017, p. 29), and in terms of the former, much of the policy, both research-informed and otherwise, gives little consideration to the question of how specific groups of pre-service teachers respond to the challenges of ITE. In addition to the Commons Briefing Paper cited above (Foster, 2019), academics at the Education Datalab in the UK suggest, from an analysis of the odds ratio of different demographics of pre-service teachers, that some specific groups are at risk of not reaching employment after training (Allen et al, 2016). Odds ratios are a way of presenting the relationship between the risk of something happening and it actually happening. If an odds ratio is less than 1, the likelihood of that eventuality is decreased. If it is more than 1, the likelihood is increased.
For example, the odds ratio of BAME trainees remaining in the profession for two years and three months post qualification is 0.69. This is in stark contrast to the odds ratio for female trainees remaining in the profession for a similar length of time (1.39). For trainees in South West England, this figure is 0.84, which compares unfavourably with an area like the East Midlands where the odds ratio is 1.22. (Allen et al., 2016). While the authors are careful to point out that readers should not over-emphasise small ratio differences, clear patterns in recruitment and retention do emerge from the national data.

Interestingly, though, there is some literature globally which addresses the problems of recruiting and retaining pre-service and early-career teachers from diverse backgrounds. This literature mainly originates in the US, where concerns about the recruitment and retention of BAME trainees stretches back more than 25 years (King, 1993). As a consequence, researchers have made concerted attempts to suggest solutions. For example, the idea that ITE programmes for pre-service teachers from diverse backgrounds need to be tailored to give opportunities to reflect on their own cultural identities is one that a number of sources put forward (e.g. Amos, 2010; Au and Blake, 2003), and indeed, in the US there appears to be an active move by researchers to propose specific points in ITE where the intersection of race and gender seems to cause particular problems (Vasquez, 2019). Consequently, then, we see the outcomes of the action research project described herein as a possible means of identifying a specific point (the initial encounter between mentor and mentee) from which a more structured approach can be developed to enable diversity to be better catered for.

The idea that the first meeting between mentor and mentee might be one of the most important encounters is largely absent within this literature. As a consequence, the researchers of the project hope to go some way to addressing this absence.
Theoretical Frameworks

The action research project described here is grounded in two related theoretical frameworks. The first of these is Lave and Wenger’s (1991) “communities of practice”, which seeks to characterise professional learning as a socialisation process by which the new professional is inducted into existing practices and beliefs. Within this model, inductees are seen as participating “legitimately” by offering new perspectives on the professional practice at hand from what Lave and Wenger term the “periphery”. These kinds of “legitimate peripheral participation” offer the opportunities to interrogate, innovate and complement existing practice, and the questions devised to structure the “first meetings” described here are seen as a means of facilitating such participation. Equally important here, though, are Lave and Wenger’s ideas about apprenticeship, which is one way of seeing the mentor and mentee relationship. For Lave and Wenger, the apprentice is someone who is a newcomer to a community of practice and is attempting to participate in it legitimately. The apprentice is not taught explicitly but rather learns through participation in the community’s activity. Such participation develops their identity as a member of the community and marks their transition from apprentice to master. Lave and Wenger are clear that such transitions can cause conflict, particularly when masters withhold knowledge from apprentices on the grounds that they think they “should be instructed, rather than as peripheral participants in the community” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 76). We see a parallel here for this project. One of our initial conjectures (about the kinds of trainees who were at risk on our course) related to those who found themselves in a situation where their mentor would not let them participate in aspects of teaching until they had been instructed in the mentor’s preferred way of approaching those things. The “initial encounter” questions proposed here assist in opening a dialogue about the master–apprentice relationship which, we hope, promotes the mentee’s participation. However, the questions also involve the mentor in what Wenger (1998) later terms “brokering” the mentee to their professional community by establishing and addressing boundaries, conflicts of interest and practices.
This idea of apprenticeship is built upon by the work of Barbara Rogoff (1995) who sees personal development as occurring on three “planes” – the personal, the interpersonal and the community – and that there are three specific processes which facilitate this development: apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation. For Rogoff, each type of process corresponds to a plane. For example, the apprenticeship process facilitates development in the community plane, while participatory appropriation facilitates individuals taking part fully in whatever activity they are participating in and fulfilling personal development. While Rogoff is often talking about children in her work, many of the ideas she presents are relevant to the development of trainee teachers. The mentoring relationship is one that is designed to move towards participatory appropriation – the point at which the trainee fully “owns” what they do as a teacher and feels that being a teacher is part of their identity. However, we see the first meeting between mentor and mentee as a means of establishing a community plane of development within which the mentee develops as an apprentice. The questions developed in this action research project may be seen as a means of starting the process of brokering the mentee to the teaching community. We argue that if questions like those established by this research project for the initial encounter are not asked, there is little hope of genuine development for the trainee teacher. A trainee teacher cannot move towards participatory appropriation because without the knowledge acquired by asking these sorts of questions (established by this research project for the initial encounter), the mentor can have little idea where the trainee sits within the teaching community.

**Methodology**

The specific context in which this research took place suggested an action research project to be the most appropriate methodological approach, given that the project team wished to see if it was possible to develop an improved experience for the trainee through a personalised approach to the first meeting with the mentor and if such an approach would result in higher retention levels on the course.
Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) suggest that action research approaches begin with the idea that something needs to be improved, and a “field of action” is decided in which attempts to address that improvement are located. In this particular study, we knew two things: institutionally collected data suggested that we should be thinking about ways of helping individual students in groups known to be at risk of lower retention rates (e.g. Cushman, 2005, 2008; Lahelma, 2000) to stay on the course, and furthermore, the relationship between mentor and mentee would be a particular focus. This latter point was because a substantial number of students (during support meetings held to address their progress) bought it up. They often cited a negative initial encounter or, worse still, no formal initial encounter with their new mentor. As stated above, this phenomenon was documented by one of our colleagues (Marshall, 2018), and so we saw this initial encounter as our field of action in which retention issues might be addressed. The main research question here asked, “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter between mentors and mentees?”

Having looked at the institutional self-evaluation data from the course’s pre-service teachers, and our colleague’s analysis, we decided that team members would write down some questions they might expect mentors to ask in that initial encounter. We saw this question-generating activity in terms of Altrichter and Gstettner’s (1993) model of action research, effectively developing an action strategy before we knew what the nature of the problem was. The team members had all been mentors (and indeed, trainees) in similar contexts to the mentors and mentees we were working with on the course; consequently, the questions generated tended to be (a) questions we had asked ourselves when we were mentors, (b) questions we ourselves had heard other mentors ask or discuss and (c) questions trainees told us that they had been asked. This initial collection of questions (Figure 1) were, quite deliberately, not refined or rephrased in any way but rather left “unpolished” to elicit responses from active mentors who elected to be involved in focus groups (pre-service teachers were not involved in the focus groups) and later, both mentors and mentees.
responding to a questionnaire. Both these data collection methods were used to refine the
questions later on (see Findings section). We saw this decision as being a crucial part of the
action research cycle in that, as Kemmis and Taggart (1992) suggest, we needed to
acknowledge that our own language and framing of these questions might be two of the
things that required change. We also accepted there would be certain questions asked at
this sort of first meeting that would be of an operational rather than a strategic or
philosophical nature. Zuber-Skerrit (1996) points out that this is a barrier that action research
approaches often face, and as such, the team needed to be open to ways of incorporating
operational concerns while at the same time being observant of the wider strategic desire to
improve mentor–mentee relationships.

Once this first set of initial encounter questions had been devised, we assembled two focus
groups of mentors to discuss them – one consisting of thirteen mentors and the other eight
mentors. The mentors in the focus group were self-selecting, choosing to attend the focus
group as part of the course development day for new and experienced mentors. All of these
mentors worked in partner schools where pre-service teachers from our course were placed
for practicum purposes. In each focus group, two members of the team discussed the origins
of the first “unpolished” iteration of the questions and then asked the focus group to say what
they thought of them and ways they might be developed to the advantage of the mentor–
mentee relationship. This was, then, a participatory opportunity, which as Morrison (1998)
indicates is a condition for successful action research, but perhaps more importantly, it was
a chance to draw on what Heron and Reason (2008) term the “extended epistemology” of
this wider group. The focus group was a data collection method which would allow us to do
what McKernan (2013) terms a “methodologically eclectic” study typical of action research
projects. The focus group responses were then taken and tabulated (see Figure 2) to revise
the existing questions or add new ones. We took the mentor comments and suggestions as
both adding new knowledge of the mentoring process and a welcome challenge to our own
language and perspectives on mentoring, which allowed us to reflect more on the process.
The next stage of the action research cycle involved distributing the focus groups’ version of the questions – a second iteration - to mentors for them to use, along with a letter introducing the project and inviting both mentor and mentee to use the questions in their initial encounters. All pre-service teachers were allocated a mentor, and therefore all pairings would have an initial encounter and use this second iteration of questions to frame that initial encounter. Although only some of the pre-service teachers were from those identified as “at-risk” groups, all pre-service teachers participated in the project. This ensured that any pre-service teacher, regardless of their diversity or needs, would have their initial encounter structured by the questions developed as part of this project. This development marked a subtle growth from thinking purely about the at-risk groups we started with to something slightly more holistic. The project was not concerned with attempting to demarcate and group the large cohort into different groups. The project was looking at emerging an approach that would be suitable for any pre-service teacher when they first met their mentor in that initial encounter.

The project team wanted to assess the nature of how mentors and mentees were using the questions as part of this project and so devised an online questionnaire to better capture the range of approaches. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gain an idea of both the way the questions were used and how both mentor and mentee felt about the questions as they were formed in this second iteration. The questionnaire consisted of four closed questions with a range of possible answers and then a space in which the respondent could add further suggestions for questions which they thought might be asked in an initial meeting (the nature of the questionnaire is discussed in more detail in the Findings section below). This gave the research team an easily codable way of seeing how the questions were being used (Cohen et al., 2002). We wanted the questionnaire to tell us something about the extent to which the mentor and mentee saw the “first meeting” questions as an opportunity for providing a structure, improving dialogue and ultimately improving the effectiveness of the mentor–mentee relationship, which both the self-evaluation data and our own observations
had suggested were the key areas for development. As Ruel et al. (2016) note, well-structured questionnaires provide an opportunity to elicit opinions, beliefs and perceptions of respondents, and we were clear here that we wanted the respondents to feel free to express their opinions about the “first meeting” questions that we had devised.

The respondents’ questionnaire answers (n=45 and n=12) were subsequently used to refine the questions twice more. In this development process, mentors suggested subtle changes of wording to existing questions; some effectively repeated questions but in a more or less formal way, while others suggested brand new questions which had not been considered, and these were added into the new iterations. It is important to note that the questionnaire questions did not change in these two refinements – they asked the respondents to say what they thought about the opportunity for providing structure, improved dialogue and effectiveness given each different iteration of the “first meeting” questions. We see this as an example of Kember’s (2000) fine-tuning process so important to action research. The differences between these iterations of the questions are discussed below.

The fourth and final iteration (see Figure 3) was an important stopping off point, then, in the action research cycle. It was a tangible outcome designed as an attempt to arrest the number of male, older and BAME trainees dropping out of the course, but perhaps more importantly, it offered an opportunity for reflexivity in terms of both the way mentors and mentees established their relationships and the way an action research methodology made us, as a course team and our mentors, consider what might have been happening in these initial meetings. We see these phenomena as reflective of Bradbury’s (2015) observation that evidence in action research is both dialogic and emergent over time. The issuing and reissuing of the questionnaire, and the subsequent refinement of the questions for use in mentor meetings, allowed us as a course team to strengthen the community of mentors and pre-service teachers with whom we worked.
Each initial encounter can only happen once, and therefore, the project took advantage of the fact that two initial meetings happen to pre-service trainees on their one-year course.

Over 18 months, three sets of mentors and their allocated pre-service teachers made use of iterations of these questions during their initial encounters. Finally, it is important to note that this research project received approval through the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Research in Education (IRED) at the University of Bedfordshire. All participants gave their informed consent voluntarily, and no participant has been identified individually in this account of the research, or any other.

Findings

The findings of the project are represented by the final questions generated and the resultant personalised approach to the initial meeting between mentor and mentee. This section of the paper focuses on telling the story of how the questions were developed. The first iteration (see Figure 1) generated by the course team, as set out in the Methodology section, is the starting point and clearly looks very different from the final iteration (see Figure 3).

Insert Fig. 1 about here.

Responses to the initial questions we generated through the focus groups and were generally characterised by a rephrasing of the original question into something more relevant and accessible – in the view of the mentors. It is worth noting that the composition of the focus group (entirely made up of mentors) may have resulted in responses that considered the questions largely from the mentor point of view, and this was a notable limitation to this part of the action research study. As a result of this, it was important to compare and contrast this data with that obtained through the questionnaire, which elicited responses from both mentors and trainees.
The sort of rephrasing suggested by the focus groups meant that some of the questions became more exploratory. For example, the question “What do you think you should be able to expect from me as your mentor?” was eventually rephrased as two different but equally important questions: “Have you been mentored before?” “Tell me about what went well and what could have been better?” This was after going through a number of suggested re-writes which ranged from “What do you need from me as your mentor?” to “How do you interpret the role of mentor?” This sort of discussion and rephrasing process illustrated both the diversity of approaches to mentoring and the types of questions that mentors asked and felt they should ask. All of the initial questions had a number of amendments suggested by the mentor group, and in some cases, we consolidated these into multiple re-wordings. The question “What are you most concerned about coming into this placement?” eventually morphed into two questions, one of which was actually about the kind of person that the trainee was and how this impacted their concerns (see Figure 3).

**Insert Fig. 2 about here.**

Some of the focus group responses did not involve rephrasing the questions at all but rather replacing them with tasks. One participant in the focus group suggested that trainees be asked to complete a prioritisation or in-tray task rather than asked the question “Would you describe yourself as responding to tasks in a spontaneous or organised way (or both)?” Similarly, a respondent in response to the question “Do you want time to write down what you want to discuss in our mentor meetings beforehand?” put forward the idea of the trainee bringing to the meeting an agenda of things they wanted to talk about. Interestingly, this did happen on the course but independently of this project and the “first meetings” research.

The second iteration of the questions, refined via the focus groups, was distributed to all mentors and trainees in our partnership for use in their initial meetings. This was accompanied by a questionnaire which, after establishing whether the respondent was a mentor or mentee, asked three simple questions:
To what extent were the mentor/mentee questions used as the structure for the initial meeting with your new mentor/mentee?

To what extent did the mentor/mentee questions provide a useful dialogue for an initial meeting between mentor and mentee?

In principle, do the mentor/mentee questions have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of the mentor/mentee relationship?

Respondents were given a number of options to choose from when answering these questions; for example, for the second question, they could specify whether they thought the questions provided a “very useful”, “useful”, “somewhat useful” or “not useful” prompt for discussion.

These questions were asked twice – once after the distribution and use of the second iteration of “first meeting” questions and again after further modification into a third iteration. On each occasion, the majority of respondents responded positively (50% of respondents in the first survey and 60% in the second), using the questions as at least a starting point for the discussion, finding them at least “somewhat useful” and determining that they had at least “some potential” for enhancing the mentor–mentee relationship. These more quantifiable responses were accompanied by some qualitative ones as well, with respondents being given the opportunity to comment on the development of the questions through open-box questions on the questionnaire, which were as follows:

- Which questions would you add?
- In what ways would you change the mentor/mentee agenda questions?

After the second iteration, responses to the first of these broadly fell into three categories. First, there were suggestions for questions which helped mentees to identify goals and meet them, such as “What areas do you want to develop?” Second, a group of suggestions around pedagogy and teaching strategies emerged with a number of people putting forward questions such as “Which area of your teaching do you think requires the most support?”
Finally, some suggestions focused on making the meeting as open and honest as possible and ways this might be achieved.

Responses to the second question tended to fall into two categories, with the first suggesting improvements to the layout of the document and the second about the way the questions might facilitate (or not) a more open relationship between mentor and mentee. For example, one respondent suggested that there needed to be a “back-up” set of questions in case the relationship between mentor and mentee broke down. As there was an existing process for such a circumstance in our course documentation, we decided not to add this to the questions but instead re-emphasised it in our mentor development conference.

After the third iteration of the survey was distributed, fewer respondents chose to make suggestions in these “open boxes” (only four responses for each question as opposed to 14 and 15, respectively, in the first survey). One might speculate that this demonstrated an increased level of satisfaction with the questions, although this assumes that the respondents would choose to articulate anything with which they were dissatisfied. Again, a number of responses focused on pedagogy and how this might feature in the first meeting. As a result of these responses, pedagogy was an aspect that did feature in the final iteration.

The final iteration of questions (as featured in Figure 3) was, then, a collaborative piece of work, a result of our action research project in which we emphasised collaboration among university faculty, mentors, and mentees. These questions are now a key element of any initial encounter between any mentor and any pre-service teacher on any of our institutional teacher preparation courses.

Insert Fig. 3 about here.

Discussion

In this study, we set out by identifying an unstructured and unresearched part of a pre-service teacher’s experience: the initial encounter with their mentor. We set out to develop a
response to the question “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter between mentors and mentees?” and through various iterations over several cycles of an action research project, we produced a set of questions which are now used throughout our institution’s portfolio of pre-service teacher education courses. We present these iterations of the questions and the discussion that surrounds them as a way of developing two ideas which come out of both the literature and the theoretical frameworks we have presented. To return to our conceptual framework, it is first important to note that these questions establish a means for trainees to engage in that legitimate peripheral participation which Lave and Wenger see as an essential feature of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 40). Second, Rogoff’s (1985) three processes of personal development (apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation – but particularly apprenticeship) are, we argue, facilitated, at least in introductory terms, by a discussion of these questions by mentor and mentee.

Both the discussions of the questions by the participants in the project and their responses to the survey questions indicated a willingness of the participants to consider the idea that there should be a dialogue between mentor and mentee at first meeting. The fact that 50% of respondents in the first survey and 60% in the second found the questions to be a useful or very useful prompt to promote discussion suggests a need to have a specific agenda for these types of first encounters. This also returns us to address Hobson et al.’s (2009) concerns about mentor preparation. While we acknowledge that discussions are likely to move away from the initial questions after a time, the initial questions offer a means by which the trainee can be inducted into not only the life of the school, but also the community of practice of which their mentor is part. As Tillema and Van Esch (2015) suggest, critical awareness of this sort of discussion allows for professional learning. For example, questions around pedagogy, curriculum and motivation become an entry point into a professional dialogue, allowing the trainee to not only participate in that community of practice, but perhaps to also add to its knowledge base. This dialogue marks a development in the
pedagogical practice of both the trainee and their pupils, which are both important elements of the mentor–mentee relationship identified in the literature (Ingersoll and Strong, 2008). This dialogue also allows the trainees to establish themselves in relationship to that community as apprentices (in Rogoff’s terms) and begin to move towards guided participation and participatory appropriation.

We also note, however, that a small minority of respondents did not feel that the questions were appropriate for the task at hand or did not address the priorities of an initial meeting between mentor and mentee. In both the closed and open questions, some participants intimated that some mentors did not like the idea of an agenda or structured discussion at all, but rather wanted the dialogue to develop organically. We accept that for some experienced mentors, this may be a perfectly valid and achievable approach, but we also suggest that with an increasing number of inexperienced mentors – in the UK at least (Oberholzer, 2019) – there may be value in our final set of questions for some people on both sides of the relationship. This position on mentors’ part, that they “know” what questions to ask, also reinforces the assumptions that they may hold about the mentoring relationship and expectations (Searby, 2009). We also accept the possibility that some of the respondents may have had experience of mentoring in non-school contexts. We did not ask questions about this and suggest that researchers further identify such questions as something for inclusion if undertaking similar research.

It is also interesting to note how certain questions developed across the life of the project. In our initial discussions as a team, we did not specifically identify pedagogy as something the mentor might ask questions about (particularly in the first placement). Instead, we thought that it might form part of the discussion of a broader question about the trainees’ concerns going into the placement. What is particularly interesting is that we did not start to see “pedagogy” suggested as the possible basis for a question until halfway through the second cycle of action research. For example, none of the mentors in the initial focus group used it as a term, despite suggesting that many of the questions should focus on teaching. We
suggest that some of this movement was caused by what we see as the “background noise” of discussions about teaching that surface on the internet and social media. The “slow teaching” movement (Thom, 2018), free schools and neo-traditional philosophies of education (Watson, 2017) have all impacted what preoccupies teachers on a daily basis, and we see the development of this question as being about this influence.

These kinds of professional questions permit the mentee to begin to understand the way that their might facilitate development of their own identities as teachers. For Rogoff (1995), participatory appropriation is a “process of becoming” (p. 141); In other words, it is to do with becoming a certain kind of person and thinking about the way that the mentee views things like deadlines, communication with colleagues and professional boundaries. As a consequence, the professional dialogue that asking and answering the questions provoked enabled the mentee to establish how their mentor viewed these professional concerns at the same time. Additionally, we argue that until the mentor gets the mentee to answer the questions developed by our research (or, at least, ones like them) such as “Is there a particular pedagogical approach that you would like to develop in this placement?”, they cannot broker the mentee to their wider professional community. In effect, the trainee is stuck in a place where professional knowledge is being withheld from them. These “potentially asymmetrical relationships” as Kim and Silver (2015, p. 33) describe them, prevent professional learning from occurring. This is the importance of the questions, then; they allow both mentor and mentee to work out where they are in relationship to the community of practice. Furthermore, a “reciprocal validation” occurs in this first meeting. When the mentor asks the mentee about their experiences, attitudes and views, they are validating the mentee as a potential member of the community of practice while the mentee is getting an insight into the mentor’s professional knowledge and experience. We suggest this validation can be significant, particularly in a second placement, as trainees who have not perhaps had particularly good developmental experiences in their earlier placements can receive recognition for the things that they have done well through the initial encounter,
through questions such as “What would you describe as your strengths and weaknesses and how do you think they might help or hinder you on placement?” Anecdotally, we offer the example of one of our secondary physics trainees who was, prior to teaching, an electrical engineer. When he first met his first placement mentor and this was disclosed, the mentor gave him responsibility for teaching a Year 13 class on electromagnetism. This recognition—that the trainee had stronger subject knowledge and real-world application of knowledge that could be beneficial to the class—established a positive working relationship for the trainee despite subsequent difficulties and challenges that he faced, which are essential for the development of a professional community (Douglas, 2014).

This reciprocal validation is essential, we suggest, for a successful mentor–mentee relationship to occur. The traditional approaches to mentoring outlined in the literature (mentor selection, pairing, preparation, dialogue, mentor types and roles) can only be developed if brokering and validation has taken place between the pre-service teacher and the mentor. Overall, one would hope that the normal mentoring process should move the mentee from Rogoff’s apprenticeship process through guided participation and on to participatory appropriation, but it clearly needs to start from this kind of structured initial encounter.

Conclusions

The “final” iteration of questions identified above should not, of course, be seen as final at all. As action researchers, we see such solutions as simply being waypoints on the route to further development. However, for the moment, this iteration is in use in our course placement handbook, and mentors and mentees have been using the questions to structure their first meetings for almost a year at the time of writing. While the project itself started by way of awareness of literature demonstrating that diversity on a course leads to variable retention rates, such as lower outcomes for BAME and male trainees who have changed career, it ended up being about the way that teacher educators can enhance the initial
encounter between all and any type of pre-service teacher and their mentor. Instead of trying
to define the diversity, we have tried to define the point at which diversity matters – the initial
encounter. It is also a way of at least addressing some important concerns and allowing for
the brokering and validation processes that we have described to take place. It is important
to emphasise that we do not see the questions as a replacement for a long-term sustainable
model of mentoring outlined in the substantial literature concerning the matter. Rather, we
see them as a support to these models and processes.

It is also important to emphasise that we see them working as part of a wider, pluralistic
approach to teacher education (Bates et al., 2018) which seeks to avoid the idea that
schools are monocultural. We hope to support the development of well-rounded, mobile
trainees who can work anywhere, and the questions are one tool that can support this
pluralistic approach. We hope, too, that other teacher educators who share this vision,
whether based in universities or not, will feel able to use the questions themselves with their
mentors and trainees and empower them to develop further. The problem of teacher
recruitment and retention, particularly for the groups who may have been identified as being
at risk of “dropping out” at the start of this article, is an issue for all teacher education
courses, and we hope that these questions and the wider findings of this action research
project will be a starting point in helping other teacher training providers to think about ways
of addressing these issues. An early premise of this project was that the initial encounter
was unstructured and there was no substantive literature that focused on this aspect. Yet
what has emerged is practice whereby the trainee can now be better differentiated for due to
the mentor having a sharper and more candid insight into the trainee’s prior experiences and
current approaches to teaching. The project involved collating and distilling the expertise of
hundreds of mentors and trainees and their experiences of several hundred “first
encounters”. This means that many of the mentors who now use the questions as part of the
institution’s approach to teacher education were involved in the project to produce the
questions in an ongoing action research project. It has been insightful to enable a community
to focus on their own practice and answer that key question: “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter between mentors and mentees?” What has emerged is a collective answer, and that answer is now being used by the community itself to structure its practice.

Reference List


Amos, Y.T (2010) “‘They Don’t Want to Get It!’Interaction between Minority and White Pre-Service Teachers in a Multicultural Education Class”. Multicultural Education. 17(4), pp.31-37


Figure 1: Initial Iteration of Questions – generated by PGCE teaching team

* Do you like to be set regular deadlines or do you feel unnecessarily pressured when regular deadlines are set?

* Would you describe yourself and responding to tasks in a spontaneous or organised way (or both)?

* Do you want time to write down what you want to discuss in our mentor meetings beforehand?

* Do you want the opportunity to speak to me briefly every day about what you're doing or are you happy to keep it to the weekly mentor meeting?

* What do you think you should be able to expect from me as your mentor?

* Which of these statements best describes your approach to work completion:
  - “If you can’t do it well, do it badly”
  - OR
  - “If you can’t do it well, don’t do it at all”

* What information do you think you need from me to start this placement off as well as you can?

* What do you think “professional” means in the context of this placement?

* What are you most concerned about coming into this placement? (Note these concerns could be about aspects of teaching and study, but also personal circumstances, workload etc.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Question</th>
<th>Suggestions for re-phrasing</th>
<th>Final focus group phrasing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*What are you most concerned about coming into this placement?</td>
<td>What are you looking forward to most about the placement?</td>
<td>P1/P2 What can you tell me about yourself as a person outside teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What can you tell me about yourself as a person outside teaching?</td>
<td>P1. What are you looking forward to and what concerns or worries do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who are you – as a person?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are you looking forward to and what concerns or worries do you have?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2 example of focus group process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question No.</th>
<th>Placement 1 or 2</th>
<th>Question wording</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>What motivated you to do a PGCE?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>What would you describe as your strengths and weaknesses and how do you think they might help or hinder you on placement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>How are you at managing your time – is this something you feel you need to develop?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>What do you expect to gain from this placement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>What are your targets/areas of development from placement 1?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>Can you give me two statements that best describe your approach to work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>Do you prefer having a pre-set agenda and structure for mentor meetings or do you prefer to let the agenda emerge from the meeting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>What boundaries do we need to set for communicating with each other? Are you okay with phone/email/text? When? When not? How quick does my response need to be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>Do you want the opportunity to speak to me briefly every day about what you’re doing or are you happy to keep it to the weekly mentor meeting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>How were you mentored on your previous placement? Tell me about what went well and what could have been better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>If you truly had no idea what to do for a lesson, but had to send something in, would you send in something which was in your opinion not very good or would you write in and say you could not do the task?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>What can you tell me about yourself as a person outside teaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>What are you looking forward to and what concerns or worries do you have about this placement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>P1/2</td>
<td>What information do you think you need from me to start this placement off as well as you can? What do you expect of me throughout the placement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>What kind of pedagogical approaches and techniques have you had the opportunity to experiment with in your first placement? Is there a particular pedagogical approach that you would like to develop in this placement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>What did you like or dislike the most about the experiences you had on your first placement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>What would you like to know about the curriculum/SOWs that we use in this department?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>