



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

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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.

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3 **Originality/Value:** The authors found very little research in the field of teacher education
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5 which looks at initial encounters between mentors and mentees and thus make an original
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7 contribution to the mentoring literature.
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10 Keywords

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12 **Mentor, pre-service teacher, mentoring, professional conversations**
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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

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3 to trainees during these first meetings, and subsequently, amongst ourselves we generated
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5 a list of questions that we had asked trainees when we were in the mentoring role. Further
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7 discussion led to the idea that we might test these questions to see if our current mentor
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9 group agreed they were appropriate questions to ask during a first meeting. Consequently,
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11 the idea of an action research project in which mentors generated and tested sets of
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13 questions was born, with the intended outcome being that the project would produce a
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15 useable set of questions that mentors could select from to organise the content of their first
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17 sit-down meeting with their mentees.
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21 The conception of mentoring used here is quite specific. It refers to the development of pre-
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23 service teachers in an ITE model, and we are aware of the argument that this model is more
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25 about coaching than mentoring. As Clutterbuck and Megginson (2006) point out, coaching is
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27 often associated with “improved performance (often over the short term) in a specific skills
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29 area”, while mentoring is often seen as being about “the identification and nurturing of
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31 potential for the whole person” (pp. 4–6). They also suggest that mentors have wider
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33 responsibilities beyond coaching-improved performances, such as exposing their mentees to
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35 other professional networks and acting more like a role model. ITE, in the UK at least, tends
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37 to combine both coach and mentor role into a sort of master–apprentice model, in which the
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39 mentee must reach a certain level of performativity but also must look to the mentor for wider
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41 aspects of their professional development. It is helpful to see these pre-service teachers –
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43 and, by association, their mentors – as being in Kram’s (1983) *initiation stage* of the
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45 mentoring relationship. We refer to them here as “trainees” or, in line with the internationally
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47 recognised term, “pre-service teacher”. We also use the term “mentee” to describe these
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49 trainees within the terms of their relationship with a mentor.
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53 This kind of mentor and mentee model, which in the UK has been standardised through a
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55 set of national criteria (DFE, 2011), has its critics; however, we felt that such arguments
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57 were not really within the scope of this paper. The course team and trainees, though, are to
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59 some extent compelled to work within this model, and so the action research project was an
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3 attempt to acknowledge that a flexibility of approach was required. The development of a set
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5 of questions which could be used in these “first meetings” offered a possible way of
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7 exploring the idea that there is not actually a “one-size-fits-all” way of mentoring trainee
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9 teachers, despite the fact that national standards might suggest otherwise.
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12 This article outlines and discusses the findings of the aforementioned action research project
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14 and seeks to discuss the data generated in both empirical and theoretical terms, with an
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16 emphasis on the notion that first meetings between mentors and mentees (and the questions
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18 asked therein) might in some small way create a more constructive relationship and, further
19
20 down the line, help to attenuate retention problems.
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22 23 24 **Literature Background (or Review)**

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26 While the action research project under discussion here focused specifically on the first
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28 meetings and relationships that took place between pre-service teachers and their mentors,
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30 we have chosen to take a slightly wider view of the literature, which refers, additionally, to
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32 the mentor–mentee relationships that exist for teachers who are also post qualification. This
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34 is because we believe that there are many similarities in the development of these
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36 relationships, and the establishment of good practices in the pre-service period serves
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38 mentors and mentees well later on.
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42 As a consequence, relevant literature to the project can broadly be grouped under three key
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44 headings: (1) the general importance of the mentoring relationship, (2) the importance of
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46 conversations to the process of mentoring and (3) mentees’ experiences in the pre-service
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48 phase, particularly where this concerns specific groups of pre-service or early-career
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50 teachers who are subsequently at risk of “dropping out” of the training programme or the
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52 teaching profession.
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55 The literature concerning the significance of the mentoring relationship (both globally and
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57 locally in the UK) is substantial (Arthur *et al.*, 1997; Butterfield *et al.*, 1999) and has a long
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59 history. It is worth noting from the outset, however, that American perspectives on teacher
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3 education tend to focus on the process of teacher induction as a whole, while the notion of a
4 mentor, and the importance of that person's relationship to a mentee as a trainee teacher, is
5 perhaps more prevalent in European literature. While space does not permit a detailed
6 analysis here, two sources in particular (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2008) give
7 a good overview of the former American perspective. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggest
8 that empirical evidence supports the notion that strong induction processes result in positive
9 outcomes in three key areas: teacher retention, pedagogical practices and student
10 achievement. Wang *et al.*'s (2008) literature review examines whether there is a connection
11 between things like the induction process and teaching practice. The study concludes that
12 there has been insufficient research into the effect of mentoring and induction on trainee
13 outcomes. The kind of study described in the current paper provides some such research,
14 which surveyed both trainees and their mentors to "help program designers develop effective
15 structures for teacher induction, especially in those programs that are expected in learning to
16 teach" (Wang *et al.*, 2008, p. 147), to support trainee teachers. Both sets of authors
17 acknowledge that mentoring is a significant part of the induction process, and their work
18 considers a range of literature and empirical evidence which demonstrates the importance of
19 the relationships involved.

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40 The European literature tends to focus on the mentoring process more specifically,
41 particularly in that literature which refers to both the importance of conversations in the
42 process of mentoring and mentees' experiences in the pre-service phase. However, for an
43 account of the significance of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee and its
44 centrality to teacher development, Hobson *et al.* (2009) give some compelling explanations.
45 This review of the literature on mentoring relationships suggests a number of key factors will
46 determine their success. These include mentor selection and pairing, mentoring strategies
47 and mentor preparation (Hobson *et al.*, 2009, pp. 211–212). We suggest that the outcomes
48 of this action research project constitute both a strategy to be adopted by mentors and an
49 aspect of mentor preparation. The questions generated by the project are not only a means
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3 of making a positive start to the mentor–mentee relationship, but also, we argue, essential
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5 for the establishment of its ongoing success.
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8 With regard to the importance of mentoring conversations, the aim of this project was to
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10 provide a structure for the first formal conversation held between the mentor and mentees in
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12 our course partnership during the initial encounter. The wider literature on the importance of
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14 dialogue to the mentoring process does offer some insight here. While there are no studies
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16 on initial encounters specifically, there a number which explore the nature and purpose of
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18 mentor–mentee dialogue. Good overviews of this area of research are provided by
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20 Hennissen *et al.*, (2008) and Crasborn *et al.* (2011), while Tillema and Van Esch (2015, pp.
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22 117–223) devote a substantial section of their book “Mentoring for Learning” to mentoring
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24 conversations. However, a number of specific themes do occur in the literature which are
25
26 particularly relevant to this study. A number of authors, for example, focus on the post-
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28 lesson observation discussion (Kim and Silver, 2016; Svojanovsky, 2017) and the impact
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30 that management of this discussion has on teacher development. There is also quite a
31
32 strong thread of language and discourse analysis in both these and other studies looking at
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34 mentor–mentee dialogue. Tillema and Van Esch’s (2015) empirical study looked at the kinds
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36 of speech acts that occur in mentoring conversations in order to establish what kinds of
37
38 mentee learning has taken place. They conclude that critical analysis of these speech acts is
39
40 a vital part of the development of the mentor–mentee relationship. Haneda *et al.* (2019)
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42 consider the social interactions in the kind of coaching relationship which often characterises
43
44 the way mentors see their role. Similarly, Crasborn *et al.*, (2011) reflect upon the idea that
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46 there might be multiple types of mentor roles, and that there is no single approach
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48 guaranteed to produce success. Finally, there is some discussion of the kinds of topic that
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50 are discussed in these dialogues, ranging from subject knowledge (Douglas, 2014) to
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52 assessment (Butterfield *et al.*, 1999).
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Types of trainees at risk

In our research, we focused on improving the likelihood that a mentee would complete 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.

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3 For example, the odds ratio of BAME trainees remaining in the profession for two years and
4 three months post qualification is 0.69. This is in stark contrast to the odds ratio for female
5 trainees remaining in the profession for a similar length of time (1.39). For trainees in South
6 West England, this figure is 0.84, which compares unfavourably with an area like the East
7 Midlands where the odds ratio is 1.22. (Allen *et al.*, 2016). While the authors are careful to
8 point out that readers should not over-emphasise small ratio differences, clear patterns in
9 recruitment and retention do emerge from the national data.
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19 Interestingly, though, there is some literature globally which addresses the problems of
20 recruiting and retaining pre-service and early-career teachers from diverse backgrounds.
21 This literature mainly originates in the US, where concerns about the recruitment and
22 retention of BAME trainees stretches back more than 25 years (King, 1993). As a
23 consequence, researchers have made concerted attempts to suggest solutions. For
24 example, the idea that ITE programmes for pre-service teachers from diverse backgrounds
25 need to be tailored to give opportunities to reflect on their own cultural identities is one that a
26 number of sources put forward (e.g. Amos, 2010; Au and Blake, 2003), and indeed, in the
27 US there appears to be an active move by researchers to propose specific points in ITE
28 where the intersection of race and gender seems to cause particular problems (Vasquez,
29 2019). Consequently, then, we see the outcomes of the action research project described
30 herein as a possible means of identifying a specific point (the initial encounter between
31 mentor and mentee) from which a more structured approach can be developed to enable
32 diversity to be better catered for.
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49 The idea that the first meeting between mentor and mentee might be one of the most
50 important encounters is largely absent within this literature. As a consequence, the
51 researchers of the project hope to go some way to addressing this absence.
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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.

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3 This idea of apprenticeship is built upon by the work of Barbara Rogoff (1995) who sees
4 personal development as occurring on three “planes” – the personal, the interpersonal and
5 the community – and that there are three specific processes which facilitate this
6 development: apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation. For
7 Rogoff, each type of process corresponds to a plane. For example, the apprenticeship
8 process facilitates development in the community plane, while participatory appropriation
9 facilitates individuals taking part fully in whatever activity they are participating in and fulfilling
10 personal development. While Rogoff is often talking about children in her work, many of the
11 ideas she presents are relevant to the development of trainee teachers. The mentoring
12 relationship is one that is designed to move towards participatory appropriation – the point at
13 which the trainee fully “owns” what they do as a teacher and feels that being a teacher is
14 part of their identity. However, we see the first meeting between mentor and mentee as a
15 means of establishing a community plane of development within which the mentee develops
16 as an apprentice. The questions developed in this action research project may be seen as a
17 means of starting the process of brokering the mentee to the teaching community. We argue
18 that if questions like those established by this research project for the initial encounter are
19 not asked, there is little hope of genuine development for the trainee teacher. A trainee
20 teacher cannot move towards participatory appropriation because without the knowledge
21 acquired by asking these sorts of questions (established by this research project for the
22 initial encounter), the mentor can have little idea where the trainee sits within the teaching
23 community.

24 **Methodology**

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26 The specific context in which this research took place suggested an action research project
27 to be the most appropriate methodological approach, given that the project team wished to
28 see if it was possible to develop an improved experience for the trainee through a
29 personalised approach to the first meeting with the mentor and if such an approach would
30 result in higher retention levels on the course.
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3 Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) suggest that action research approaches begin with the idea
4 that something needs to be improved, and a “field of action” is decided in which attempts to
5 address that improvement are located. In this particular study, we knew two things:
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7 institutionally collected data suggested that we should be thinking about ways of helping
8 individual students in groups known to be at risk of lower retention rates (e.g. Cushman,
9 2005, 2008; Lahelma, 2000) to stay on the course, and furthermore, the relationship
10 between mentor and mentee would be a particular focus. This latter point was because a
11 substantial number of students (during support meetings held to address their progress)
12 bought it up. They often cited a negative initial encounter or, worse still, no formal initial
13 encounter with their new mentor. As stated above, this phenomenon was documented by
14 one of our colleagues (Marshall, 2018), and so we saw this initial encounter as our field of
15 action in which retention issues might be addressed. The main research question here
16 asked, “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter between mentors and
17 mentees?”
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33 Having looked at the institutional self-evaluation data from the course’s pre-service teachers,
34 and our colleague’s analysis, we decided that team members would write down some
35 questions they might expect mentors to ask in that initial encounter. We saw this question-
36 generating activity in terms of Altrichter and Gstettner’s (1993) model of action research,
37 effectively developing an action strategy before we knew what the nature of the problem
38 was. The team members had all been mentors (and indeed, trainees) in similar contexts to
39 the mentors and mentees we were working with on the course; consequently, the questions
40 generated tended to be (a) questions we had asked ourselves when we were mentors, (b)
41 questions we ourselves had heard other mentors ask or discuss and (c) questions trainees
42 told us that they had been asked. This initial collection of questions (Figure 1) were, quite
43 deliberately, not refined or rephrased in any way but rather left “unpolished” to elicit
44 responses from active mentors who elected to be involved in focus groups (pre-service
45 teachers were not involved in the focus groups) and later, both mentors and mentees
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3 responding to a questionnaire. Both these data collection methods were used to refine the
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5 questions later on (see Findings section). We saw this decision as being a crucial part of the
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7 action research cycle in that, as Kemmis and Taggart (1992) suggest, we needed to
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9 acknowledge that our own language and framing of these questions might be two of the
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11 things that required change. We also accepted there would be certain questions asked at
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13 this sort of first meeting that would be of an operational rather than a strategic or
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15 philosophical nature. Zuber-Skerrit (1996) points out that this is a barrier that action research
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17 approaches often face, and as such, the team needed to be open to ways of incorporating
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19 operational concerns while at the same time being observant of the wider strategic desire to
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21 improve mentor–mentee relationships.
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25 Once this first set of initial encounter questions had been devised, we assembled two focus
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27 groups of mentors to discuss them – one consisting of thirteen mentors and the other eight
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29 mentors. The mentors in the focus group were self-selecting, choosing to attend the focus
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31 group as part of the course development day for new and experienced mentors. All of these
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33 mentors worked in partner schools where pre-service teachers from our course were placed
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35 for practicum purposes. In each focus group, two members of the team discussed the origins
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37 of the first “unpolished” iteration of the questions and then asked the focus group to say what
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39 they thought of them and ways they might be developed to the advantage of the mentor–
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41 mentee relationship. This was, then, a participatory opportunity, which as Morrison (1998)
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43 indicates is a condition for successful action research, but perhaps more importantly, it was
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45 a chance to draw on what Heron and Reason (2008) term the “extended epistemology” of
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47 this wider group. The focus group was a data collection method which would allow us to do
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49 what McKernan (2013) terms a “methodologically eclectic” study typical of action research
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51 projects. The focus group responses were then taken and tabulated (see Figure 2) to revise
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53 the existing questions or add new ones. We took the mentor comments and suggestions as
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55 both adding new knowledge of the mentoring process and a welcome challenge to our own
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57 language and perspectives on mentoring, which allowed us to reflect more on the process.
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3 The next stage of the action research cycle involved distributing the focus groups' version of
4 the questions – a second iteration - to mentors for them to use, along with a letter
5 introducing the project and inviting both mentor and mentee to use the questions in their
6 initial encounters. All pre-service teachers were allocated a mentor, and therefore all
7 pairings would have an initial encounter and use this second iteration of questions to frame
8 that initial encounter. Although only some of the pre-service teachers were from those
9 identified as “at-risk” groups, all pre-service teachers participated in the project. This ensured
10 that any pre-service teacher, regardless of their diversity or needs, would have their initial
11 encounter structured by the questions developed as part of this project. This development
12 marked a subtle growth from thinking purely about the at-risk groups we started with to
13 something slightly more holistic. The project was not concerned with attempting to
14 demarcate and group the large cohort into different groups. The project was looking at
15 emerging an approach that would be suitable for any pre-service teacher when they first met
16 their mentor in that initial encounter.
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33 The project team wanted to assess the nature of how mentors and mentees were using the
34 questions as part of this project and so devised an online questionnaire to better capture the
35 range of approaches. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gain an idea of both the way
36 the questions were used and how both mentor and mentee felt about the questions as they
37 were formed in this second iteration. The questionnaire consisted of four closed questions
38 with a range of possible answers and then a space in which the respondent could add
39 further suggestions for questions which they thought might be asked in an initial meeting (the
40 nature of the questionnaire is discussed in more detail in the Findings section below). This
41 gave the research team an easily codable way of seeing how the questions were being used
42 (Cohen *et al.*, 2002). We wanted the questionnaire to tell us something about the extent to
43 which the mentor and mentee saw the “first meeting” questions as an opportunity for
44 *providing a structure, improving dialogue* and ultimately *improving the effectiveness of the*
45 *mentor–mentee relationship*, which both the self-evaluation data and our own observations
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3 had suggested were the key areas for development. As Ruel *et al.* (2016) note, well-
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5 structured questionnaires provide an opportunity to elicit opinions, beliefs and perceptions of
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7 respondents, and we were clear here that we wanted the respondents to feel free to express
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9 their opinions about the “first meeting” questions that we had devised.
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12 The respondents’ questionnaire answers (n=45 and n=12) were subsequently used to refine
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14 the questions twice more. In this development process, mentors suggested subtle changes
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16 of wording to existing questions; some effectively repeated questions but in a more or less
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18 formal way, while others suggested brand new questions which had not been considered,
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20 and these were added into the new iterations. It is important to note that the *questionnaire*
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22 questions did not change in these two refinements – they asked the respondents to say what
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24 they thought about the opportunity for providing structure, improved dialogue and
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26 effectiveness given each different iteration of the “first meeting” questions. We see this as an
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28 example of Kember’s (2000) fine-tuning process so important to action research. The
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30 differences between these iterations of the questions are discussed below.
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34 The fourth and final iteration (see Figure 3) was an important stopping off point, then, in the
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36 action research cycle. It was a tangible outcome designed as an attempt to arrest the
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38 number of male, older and BAME trainees dropping out of the course, but perhaps more
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40 importantly, it offered an opportunity for reflexivity in terms of both the way mentors and
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42 mentees established their relationships and the way an action research methodology made
43
44 us, as a course team and our mentors, consider what might have been happening in these
45
46 initial meetings. We see these phenomena as reflective of Bradbury’s (2015) observation
47
48 that evidence in action research is both dialogic and emergent over time. The issuing and
49
50 reissuing of the questionnaire, and the subsequent refinement of the questions for use in
51
52 mentor meetings, allowed us as a course team to strengthen the community of mentors and
53
54 pre-service teachers with whom we worked.
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3 Each initial encounter can only happen once, and therefore, the project took advantage of
4 the fact that two initial meetings happen to pre-service trainees on their one-year course.
5

6
7 Over 18 months, three sets of mentors and their allocated pre-service teachers made use of
8 iterations of these questions during their initial encounters. Finally, it is important to note that
9 this research project received approval through the Ethics Committee of the Institute for
10 Research in Education (IRED) at the University of Bedfordshire. All participants gave their
11 informed consent voluntarily, and no participant has been identified individually in this
12 account of the research, or any other.
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21 Findings

22
23 The findings of the project are represented by the final questions generated and the resultant
24 personalised approach to the initial meeting between mentor and mentee. This section of the
25 paper focuses on telling the story of how the questions were developed. The first iteration
26 (see Figure 1) generated by the course team, as set out in the Methodology section, is the
27 starting point and clearly looks very different from the final iteration (see Figure 3).
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35 **Insert Fig. 1 about here.**
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40 Responses to the initial questions we generated through the focus groups and were
41 generally characterised by a rephrasing of the original question into something more relevant
42 and accessible – in the view of the mentors. It is worth noting that the composition of the
43 focus group (entirely made up of mentors) may have resulted in responses that considered
44 the questions largely from the mentor point of view, and this was a notable limitation to this
45 part of the action research study. As a result of this, it was important to compare and
46 contrast this data with that obtained through the questionnaire, which elicited responses from
47 both mentors and trainees.
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3 The sort of rephrasing suggested by the focus groups meant that some of the questions
4
5 became more exploratory. For example, the question “What do you think you should be able
6
7 to expect from me as your mentor?” was eventually rephrased as two different but equally
8
9 important questions: “Have you been mentored before?” “Tell me about what went well and
10
11 what could have been better?” This was after going through a number of suggested re-writes
12
13 which ranged from “What do you need from me as your mentor?” to “How do you interpret
14
15 the role of mentor?” This sort of discussion and rephrasing process illustrated both the
16
17 diversity of approaches to mentoring and the types of questions that mentors asked and felt
18
19 they should ask. All of the initial questions had a number of amendments suggested by the
20
21 mentor group, and in some cases, we consolidated these into multiple re-wordings. The
22
23 question “What are you most concerned about coming into this placement?” eventually
24
25 morphed into two questions, one of which was actually about the kind of person that the
26
27 trainee was and how this impacted their concerns (see Figure 3).
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31 **Insert Fig. 2 about here.**
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35 Some of the focus group responses did not involve rephrasing the questions at all but rather
36
37 replacing them with tasks. One participant in the focus group suggested that trainees be
38
39 asked to complete a prioritisation or in-tray task rather than asked the question “Would you
40
41 describe yourself as responding to tasks in a spontaneous or organised way (or both)?”
42
43 Similarly, a respondent in response to the question “Do you want time to write down what
44
45 you want to discuss in our mentor meetings beforehand?” put forward the idea of the trainee
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47 bringing to the meeting an agenda of things they wanted to talk about. Interestingly, this did
48
49 happen on the course but independently of this project and the “first meetings” research.
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53 The second iteration of the questions, refined via the focus groups, was distributed to all
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55 mentors and trainees in our partnership for use in their initial meetings. This was
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57 accompanied by a questionnaire which, after establishing whether the respondent was a
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59 mentor or mentee, asked three simple questions:
60

- 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?”

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3 Finally, some suggestions focused on making the meeting as open and honest as possible
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5 and ways this might be achieved.
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8 Responses to the second question tended to fall into two categories, with the first suggesting
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10 improvements to the layout of the document and the second about the way the questions
11
12 might facilitate (or not) a more open relationship between mentor and mentee. For example,
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14 one respondent suggested that there needed to be a “back-up” set of questions in case the
15
16 relationship between mentor and mentee broke down. As there was an existing process for
17
18 such a circumstance in our course documentation, we decided not to add this to the
19
20 questions but instead re-emphasised it in our mentor development conference.
21
22

23
24 After the third iteration of the survey was distributed, fewer respondents chose to make
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26 suggestions in these “open boxes” (only four responses for each question as opposed to 14
27
28 and 15, respectively, in the first survey). One might speculate that this demonstrated an
29
30 increased level of satisfaction with the questions, although this assumes that the
31
32 respondents would choose to articulate anything with which they were dissatisfied. Again, a
33
34 number of responses focused on pedagogy and how this might feature in the first meeting.
35
36 As a result of these responses, pedagogy was an aspect that did feature in the final iteration.
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40 The final iteration of questions (as featured in Figure 3) was, then, a collaborative piece of
41
42 work, a result of our action research project in which we emphasised collaboration among
43
44 university faculty, mentors, and mentees. These questions are now a key element of any
45
46 initial encounter between any mentor and any pre-service teacher on any of our institutional
47
48 teacher preparation courses.
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51 **Insert Fig. 3 about here.**
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54 55 **Discussion**

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57 In this study, we set out by identifying an unstructured and unresearched part of a pre-
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59 service teacher’s experience: the initial encounter with their mentor. We set out to develop a
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3 response to the question “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter
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5 between mentors and mentees?” and through various iterations over several cycles of an
6
7 action research project, we produced a set of questions which are now used throughout our
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9 institution’s portfolio of pre-service teacher education courses. We present these iterations of
10
11 the questions and the discussion that surrounds them as a way of developing two ideas
12
13 which come out of both the literature and the theoretical frameworks we have presented. To
14
15 return to our conceptual framework, it is first important to note that these questions establish
16
17 a means for trainees to engage in that legitimate peripheral participation which Lave and
18
19 Wenger see as an essential feature of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 40). Second,
20
21 Rogoff’s (1985) three processes of personal development (apprenticeship, guided
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23 participation and participatory appropriation – but particularly apprenticeship) are, we argue,
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25 facilitated, at least in introductory terms, by a discussion of these questions by mentor and
26
27 mentee.
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31 Both the discussions of the questions by the participants in the project and their responses
32
33 to the survey questions indicated a willingness of the participants to consider the idea that
34
35 there should be a dialogue between mentor and mentee at first meeting. The fact that 50%
36
37 of respondents in the first survey and 60% in the second found the questions to be a useful
38
39 or very useful prompt to promote discussion suggests a need to have a specific agenda for
40
41 these types of first encounters. This also returns us to address Hobson *et al.*’s (2009)
42
43 concerns about mentor preparation. While we acknowledge that discussions are likely to
44
45 move away from the initial questions after a time, the initial questions offer a means by which
46
47 the trainee can be inducted into not only the life of the school, but also the community of
48
49 practice of which their mentor is part. As Tillema and Van Esch (2015) suggest, critical
50
51 awareness of this sort of discussion allows for professional learning. For example, questions
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53 around pedagogy, curriculum and motivation become an entry point into a professional
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55 dialogue, allowing the trainee to not only participate in that community of practice, but
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57 perhaps to also add to its knowledge base. This dialogue marks a development in the
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3 pedagogical practice of both the trainee and their pupils, which are both important elements
4
5 of the mentor–mentee relationship identified in the literature (Ingersoll and Strong, 2008).

6
7 This dialogue also allows the trainees to establish themselves in relationship to that
8
9 community as apprentices (in Rogoff's terms) and begin to move towards guided
10
11 participation and participatory appropriation.
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13
14 **We** also note, however, that a small minority of respondents did not feel that the questions
15
16 were appropriate for the task at hand or did not address the priorities of an initial meeting
17
18 between mentor and mentee. In both the closed and open questions, some participants
19
20 intimated that some mentors did not like the idea of an agenda or structured discussion at
21
22 all, but rather wanted the dialogue to develop organically. We accept that for some
23
24 experienced mentors, this may be a perfectly valid and achievable approach, but we also
25
26 suggest that with an increasing number of inexperienced mentors – in the UK at least
27
28 (Oberholzer, 2019) – there may be value in our final set of questions for some people on
29
30 both sides of the relationship. This position on mentors' part, that they "know" what questions
31
32 to ask, also reinforces the assumptions that they may hold about the mentoring relationship
33
34 and expectations (Searby, 2009). We also accept the possibility that some of the
35
36 respondents may have had experience of mentoring in non-school contexts. We did not ask
37
38 questions about this and suggest that researchers further identify such questions as
39
40 something for inclusion if undertaking similar research.
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45 It is also interesting to note how certain questions developed across the life of the project. In
46
47 our initial discussions as a team, we did not specifically identify pedagogy as something the
48
49 mentor might ask questions about (particularly in the first placement). Instead, we thought
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51 that it might form part of the discussion of a broader question about the trainees' concerns
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53 going into the placement. What is particularly interesting is that we did not start to see
54
55 "pedagogy" suggested as the possible basis for a question until halfway through the second
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57 cycle of action research. For example, none of the mentors in the initial focus group used it
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59 as a term, despite suggesting that many of the questions should focus on teaching. We
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3 suggest that some of this movement was caused by what we see as the “background noise”
4
5 of discussions about teaching that surface on the internet and social media. The “slow
6
7 teaching” movement (Thom, 2018), free schools and neo-traditional philosophies of
8
9 education (Watson, 2017) have all impacted what preoccupies teachers on a daily basis,
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11 and we see the development of this question as being about this influence.
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15 These kinds of professional questions permit the mentee to begin to understand the way that
16
17 their might facilitate development of their own identities as teachers. For Rogoff (1995),
18
19 participatory appropriation is a “process of becoming” (p. 141); In other words, it is to do with
20
21 becoming a certain kind of person and thinking about the way that the mentee views things
22
23 like deadlines, communication with colleagues and professional boundaries. As a
24
25 consequence, the professional dialogue that asking and answering the questions provoked
26
27 enabled the mentee to establish how their mentor viewed these professional concerns at the
28
29 same time. Additionally, we argue that until the mentor gets the mentee to answer the
30
31 questions developed by our research (or, at least, ones like them) such as “Is there a
32
33 particular pedagogical approach that you would like to develop in this placement?”, they
34
35 cannot broker the mentee to their wider professional community. In effect, the trainee is
36
37 stuck in a place where professional knowledge is being withheld from them. These
38
39 “potentially asymmetrical relationships” as Kim and Silver (2015, p. 33) describe them,
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41 prevent professional learning from occurring. This is the importance of the questions, then;
42
43 they allow both mentor and mentee to work out where they are in relationship to the
44
45 community of practice. Furthermore, a “reciprocal validation” occurs in this first meeting.
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47 When the mentor asks the mentee about their experiences, attitudes and views, they are
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49 validating the mentee as a potential member of the community of practice while the mentee
50
51 is getting an insight into the mentor’s professional knowledge and experience. We suggest
52
53 this validation can be significant, particularly in a second placement, as trainees who have
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55 not perhaps had particularly good developmental experiences in their earlier placements can
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57 receive recognition for the things that they have done well through the initial encounter,
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3 through questions such as “What would you describe as your strengths and weaknesses
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5 and how do you think they might help or hinder you on placement?” Anecdotally, we offer the
6
7 example of one of our secondary physics trainees who was, prior to teaching, an electrical
8
9 engineer. When he first met his first placement mentor and this was disclosed, the mentor
10
11 gave him responsibility for teaching a Year 13 class on electromagnetism. This recognition –
12
13 that the trainee had stronger subject knowledge and real-world application of knowledge that
14
15 could be beneficial to the class – established a positive working relationship for the trainee
16
17 despite subsequent difficulties and challenges that he faced, which are essential for the
18
19 development of a professional community (Douglas, 2014).
20
21
22

23 This reciprocal validation is essential, we suggest, for a successful mentor–mentee
24
25 relationship to occur. The traditional approaches to mentoring outlined in the literature
26
27 (mentor selection, pairing, preparation, dialogue, mentor types and roles) can only be
28
29 developed if brokering and validation has taken place between the pre-service teacher and
30
31 the mentor. Overall, one would hope that the normal mentoring process should move the
32
33 mentee from Rogoff’s apprenticeship process through guided participation and on to
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35 participatory appropriation, but it clearly needs to start from this kind of structured initial
36
37 encounter.
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41 **Conclusions**

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43 The “final” iteration of questions identified above should not, of course, be seen as final at
44
45 all. As action researchers, we see such solutions as simply being waypoints on the route to
46
47 further development. However, for the moment, this iteration is in use in our course
48
49 placement handbook, and mentors and mentees have been using the questions to structure
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51 their first meetings for almost a year at the time of writing. While the project itself started by
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53 way of awareness of literature demonstrating that diversity on a course leads to variable
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55 retention rates, such as lower outcomes for BAME and male trainees who have changed
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57 career, it ended up being about the way that teacher educators can enhance the initial
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3 encounter *between all and any type of pre-service teacher* and their mentor. Instead of trying
4 to define the diversity, we have tried to define the point at which diversity matters – the initial
5 encounter. It is also a way of at least addressing some important concerns and allowing for
6 the brokering and validation processes that we have described to take place. It is important
7 to emphasise that we do not see the questions as a replacement for a long-term sustainable
8 model of mentoring outlined in the substantial literature concerning the matter. Rather, we
9 see them as a support to these models and processes.
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19 It is also important to emphasise that we see them working as part of a wider, pluralistic
20 approach to teacher education (Bates *et al.*, 2018) which seeks to avoid the idea that
21 schools are monocultural. We hope to support the development of well-rounded, mobile
22 trainees who can work anywhere, and the questions are one tool that can support this
23 pluralistic approach. We hope, too, that other teacher educators who share this vision,
24 whether based in universities or not, will feel able to use the questions themselves with their
25 mentors and trainees and empower them to develop further. The problem of teacher
26 recruitment and retention, particularly for the groups who may have been identified as being
27 at risk of “dropping out” at the start of this article, is an issue for all teacher education
28 courses, and we hope that these questions and the wider findings of this action research
29 project will be a starting point in helping other teacher training providers to think about ways
30 of addressing these issues. An early premise of this project was that the initial encounter
31 was unstructured and there was no substantive literature that focused on this aspect. Yet
32 what has emerged is practice whereby the trainee can now be better differentiated for due to
33 the mentor having a sharper and more candid insight into the trainee’s prior experiences and
34 current approaches to teaching. The project involved collating and distilling the expertise of
35 hundreds of mentors and trainees and their experiences of several hundred “first
36 encounters”. This means that many of the mentors who now use the questions as part of the
37 institution’s approach to teacher education were involved in the project to produce the
38 questions in an ongoing action research project. It has been insightful to enable a community
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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.

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3 **"First Meetings": Constructive first encounters between pre-service teachers and**
4 **their mentors**
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8 **Structured Abstract**
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11 **Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to report the findings from an action research project
12 in which the researchers sought to develop a set of questions for use by mentors
13 (experienced teachers) and mentees (pre-service teachers) on a course of initial teacher
14 education (ITE) when they first met – the “initial encounter”.
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20 **Design Methodology/Approach:** The researchers used an action research approach to
21 address the lower retention rate of pre-service teachers from different backgrounds, such as
22 Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), and the issues around mentoring which may
23 exacerbate this problem. Discussions between the course team and participating mentors
24 and mentees suggested that the initial encounter between mentor and mentee was
25 significant, and an action research methodology would allow for developing questions that
26 might structure such encounters.
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32 **Findings:** The researchers found that a useful and effective set of questions could be
33 developed and used by mentors and mentees. Additionally, this process gave researchers
34 insights into the nature of the first encounters between mentors and mentees on an ITE
35 course and how both groups see their roles. In several cycles of action research, the
36 participants produced a number of iterations of such questions, which were refined across a
37 two-year period.
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43 **Research Limitations/Implications:** While it is too early to tell if the issues leading to the
44 lower retention rate of pre-service teachers that prompted the project have been reduced in
45 any significant way, the researchers suggest that thinking about these initial encounters can
46 impact the way a mentor and mentee goes on to build a relationship.
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3 **Originality/Value:** The authors found very little research in the field of teacher education
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5 which looks at initial encounters between mentors and mentees and thus make an original
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7 contribution to the mentoring literature.
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10 Keywords

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12 **Mentor, pre-service teacher, mentoring, professional conversations**
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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

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3 to trainees during these first meetings, and subsequently, amongst ourselves we generated
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5 a list of questions that we had asked trainees when we were in the mentoring role. Further
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7 discussion led to the idea that we might test these questions to see if our current mentor
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9 group agreed they were appropriate questions to ask during a first meeting. Consequently,
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11 the idea of an action research project in which mentors generated and tested sets of
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13 questions was born, with the intended outcome being that the project would produce a
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15 useable set of questions that mentors could select from to organise the content of their first
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17 sit-down meeting with their mentees.
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21 The conception of mentoring used here is quite specific. It refers to the development of pre-
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23 service teachers in an ITE model, and we are aware of the argument that this model is more
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25 about coaching than mentoring. As Clutterbuck and Megginson (2006) point out, coaching is
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27 often associated with “improved performance (often over the short term) in a specific skills
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29 area”, while mentoring is often seen as being about “the identification and nurturing of
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31 potential for the whole person” (pp. 4–6). They also suggest that mentors have wider
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33 responsibilities beyond coaching-improved performances, such as exposing their mentees to
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35 other professional networks and acting more like a role model. ITE, in the UK at least, tends
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37 to combine both coach and mentor role into a sort of master–apprentice model, in which the
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39 mentee must reach a certain level of performativity but also must look to the mentor for wider
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41 aspects of their professional development. It is helpful to see these pre-service teachers –
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43 and, by association, their mentors – as being in Kram’s (1983) *initiation stage* of the
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45 mentoring relationship. We refer to them here as “trainees” or, in line with the internationally
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47 recognised term, “pre-service teacher”. We also use the term “mentee” to describe these
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49 trainees within the terms of their relationship with a mentor.
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53 This kind of mentor and mentee model, which in the UK has been standardised through a
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55 set of national criteria (DFE, 2011), has its critics; however, we felt that such arguments
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57 were not really within the scope of this paper. The course team and trainees, though, are to
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59 some extent compelled to work within this model, and so the action research project was an
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3 attempt to acknowledge that a flexibility of approach was required. The development of a set
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5 of questions which could be used in these “first meetings” offered a possible way of
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7 exploring the idea that there is not actually a “one-size-fits-all” way of mentoring trainee
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9 teachers, despite the fact that national standards might suggest otherwise.
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12 This article outlines and discusses the findings of the aforementioned action research project
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14 and seeks to discuss the data generated in both empirical and theoretical terms, with an
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16 emphasis on the notion that first meetings between mentors and mentees (and the questions
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18 asked therein) might in some small way create a more constructive relationship and, further
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20 down the line, help to attenuate retention problems.
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22 23 24 **Literature Background (or Review)**

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26 While the action research project under discussion here focused specifically on the first
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28 meetings and relationships that took place between pre-service teachers and their mentors,
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30 we have chosen to take a slightly wider view of the literature, which refers, additionally, to
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32 the mentor–mentee relationships that exist for teachers who are also post qualification. This
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34 is because we believe that there are many similarities in the development of these
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36 relationships, and the establishment of good practices in the pre-service period serves
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38 mentors and mentees well later on.
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42 As a consequence, relevant literature to the project can broadly be grouped under three key
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44 headings: (1) the general importance of the mentoring relationship, (2) the importance of
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46 conversations to the process of mentoring and (3) mentees’ experiences in the pre-service
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48 phase, particularly where this concerns specific groups of pre-service or early-career
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50 teachers who are subsequently at risk of “dropping out” of the training programme or the
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52 teaching profession.
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55 The literature concerning the significance of the mentoring relationship (both globally and
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57 locally in the UK) is substantial (Arthur *et al.*, 1997; Butterfield *et al.*, 1999) and has a long
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59 history. It is worth noting from the outset, however, that American perspectives on teacher
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3 education tend to focus on the process of teacher induction as a whole, while the notion of a
4 mentor, and the importance of that person's relationship to a mentee as a trainee teacher, is
5 perhaps more prevalent in European literature. While space does not permit a detailed
6 analysis here, two sources in particular (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2008) give
7 a good overview of the former American perspective. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggest
8 that empirical evidence supports the notion that strong induction processes result in positive
9 outcomes in three key areas: teacher retention, pedagogical practices and student
10 achievement. Wang *et al.*'s (2008) literature review examines whether there is a connection
11 between things like the induction process and teaching practice. The study concludes that
12 there has been insufficient research into the effect of mentoring and induction on trainee
13 outcomes. The kind of study described in the current paper provides some such research,
14 which surveyed both trainees and their mentors to "help program designers develop effective
15 structures for teacher induction, especially in those programs that are expected in learning to
16 teach" (Wang *et al.*, 2008, p. 147), to support trainee teachers. Both sets of authors
17 acknowledge that mentoring is a significant part of the induction process, and their work
18 considers a range of literature and empirical evidence which demonstrates the importance of
19 the relationships involved.

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40 The European literature tends to focus on the mentoring process more specifically,
41 particularly in that literature which refers to both the importance of conversations in the
42 process of mentoring and mentees' experiences in the pre-service phase. However, for an
43 account of the significance of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee and its
44 centrality to teacher development, Hobson *et al.* (2009) give some compelling explanations.
45 This review of the literature on mentoring relationships suggests a number of key factors will
46 determine their success. These include mentor selection and pairing, mentoring strategies
47 and mentor preparation (Hobson *et al.*, 2009, pp. 211–212). We suggest that the outcomes
48 of this action research project constitute both a strategy to be adopted by mentors and an
49 aspect of mentor preparation. The questions generated by the project are not only a means
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3 of making a positive start to the mentor–mentee relationship, but also, we argue, essential
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5 for the establishment of its ongoing success.
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8 With regard to the importance of mentoring conversations, the aim of this project was to
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10 provide a structure for the first formal conversation held between the mentor and mentees in
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12 our course partnership during the initial encounter. The wider literature on the importance of
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14 dialogue to the mentoring process does offer some insight here. While there are no studies
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16 on initial encounters specifically, there a number which explore the nature and purpose of
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18 mentor–mentee dialogue. Good overviews of this area of research are provided by
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20 Hennissen *et al.*, (2008) and Crasborn *et al.* (2011), while Tillema and Van Esch (2015, pp.
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22 117–223) devote a substantial section of their book “Mentoring for Learning” to mentoring
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24 conversations. However, a number of specific themes do occur in the literature which are
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26 particularly relevant to this study. A number of authors, for example, focus on the post-
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28 lesson observation discussion (Kim and Silver, 2016; Svojanovsky, 2017) and the impact
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30 that management of this discussion has on teacher development. There is also quite a
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32 strong thread of language and discourse analysis in both these and other studies looking at
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34 mentor–mentee dialogue. Tillema and Van Esch’s (2015) empirical study looked at the kinds
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36 of speech acts that occur in mentoring conversations in order to establish what kinds of
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38 mentee learning has taken place. They conclude that critical analysis of these speech acts is
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40 a vital part of the development of the mentor–mentee relationship. Haneda *et al.* (2019)
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42 consider the social interactions in the kind of coaching relationship which often characterises
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44 the way mentors see their role. Similarly, Crasborn *et al.*, (2011) reflect upon the idea that
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46 there might be multiple types of mentor roles, and that there is no single approach
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48 guaranteed to produce success. Finally, there is some discussion of the kinds of topic that
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50 are discussed in these dialogues, ranging from subject knowledge (Douglas, 2014) to
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52 assessment (Butterfield *et al.*, 1999).
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Types of trainees at risk

In our research, we focused on improving the likelihood that a mentee would complete 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.

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3 For example, the odds ratio of BAME trainees remaining in the profession for two years and
4 three months post qualification is 0.69. This is in stark contrast to the odds ratio for female
5 trainees remaining in the profession for a similar length of time (1.39). For trainees in South
6 West England, this figure is 0.84, which compares unfavourably with an area like the East
7 Midlands where the odds ratio is 1.22. (Allen *et al.*, 2016). While the authors are careful to
8 point out that readers should not over-emphasise small ratio differences, clear patterns in
9 recruitment and retention do emerge from the national data.
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19 Interestingly, though, there is some literature globally which addresses the problems of
20 recruiting and retaining pre-service and early-career teachers from diverse backgrounds.
21 This literature mainly originates in the US, where concerns about the recruitment and
22 retention of BAME trainees stretches back more than 25 years (King, 1993). As a
23 consequence, researchers have made concerted attempts to suggest solutions. For
24 example, the idea that ITE programmes for pre-service teachers from diverse backgrounds
25 need to be tailored to give opportunities to reflect on their own cultural identities is one that a
26 number of sources put forward (e.g. Amos, 2010; Au and Blake, 2003), and indeed, in the
27 US there appears to be an active move by researchers to propose specific points in ITE
28 where the intersection of race and gender seems to cause particular problems (Vasquez,
29 2019). Consequently, then, we see the outcomes of the action research project described
30 herein as a possible means of identifying a specific point (the initial encounter between
31 mentor and mentee) from which a more structured approach can be developed to enable
32 diversity to be better catered for.
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49 The idea that the first meeting between mentor and mentee might be one of the most
50 important encounters is largely absent within this literature. As a consequence, the
51 researchers of the project hope to go some way to addressing this absence.
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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.

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3 This idea of apprenticeship is built upon by the work of Barbara Rogoff (1995) who sees
4 personal development as occurring on three “planes” – the personal, the interpersonal and
5 the community – and that there are three specific processes which facilitate this
6 development: apprenticeship, guided participation and participatory appropriation. For
7 Rogoff, each type of process corresponds to a plane. For example, the apprenticeship
8 process facilitates development in the community plane, while participatory appropriation
9 facilitates individuals taking part fully in whatever activity they are participating in and fulfilling
10 personal development. While Rogoff is often talking about children in her work, many of the
11 ideas she presents are relevant to the development of trainee teachers. The mentoring
12 relationship is one that is designed to move towards participatory appropriation – the point at
13 which the trainee fully “owns” what they do as a teacher and feels that being a teacher is
14 part of their identity. However, we see the first meeting between mentor and mentee as a
15 means of establishing a community plane of development within which the mentee develops
16 as an apprentice. The questions developed in this action research project may be seen as a
17 means of starting the process of brokering the mentee to the teaching community. We argue
18 that if questions like those established by this research project for the initial encounter are
19 not asked, there is little hope of genuine development for the trainee teacher. A trainee
20 teacher cannot move towards participatory appropriation because without the knowledge
21 acquired by asking these sorts of questions (established by this research project for the
22 initial encounter), the mentor can have little idea where the trainee sits within the teaching
23 community.

48 **Methodology**

51 The specific context in which this research took place suggested an action research project
52 to be the most appropriate methodological approach, given that the project team wished to
53 see if it was possible to develop an improved experience for the trainee through a
54 personalised approach to the first meeting with the mentor and if such an approach would
55 result in higher retention levels on the course.

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3 Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) suggest that action research approaches begin with the idea
4 that something needs to be improved, and a “field of action” is decided in which attempts to
5 address that improvement are located. In this particular study, we knew two things:
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7 institutionally collected data suggested that we should be thinking about ways of helping
8 individual students in groups known to be at risk of lower retention rates (e.g. Cushman,
9 2005, 2008; Lahelma, 2000) to stay on the course, and furthermore, the relationship
10 between mentor and mentee would be a particular focus. This latter point was because a
11 substantial number of students (during support meetings held to address their progress)
12 bought it up. They often cited a negative initial encounter or, worse still, no formal initial
13 encounter with their new mentor. As stated above, this phenomenon was documented by
14 one of our colleagues (Marshall, 2018), and so we saw this initial encounter as our field of
15 action in which retention issues might be addressed. The main research question here
16 asked, “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter between mentors and
17 mentees?”
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33 Having looked at the institutional self-evaluation data from the course’s pre-service teachers,
34 and our colleague’s analysis, we decided that team members would write down some
35 questions they might expect mentors to ask in that initial encounter. We saw this question-
36 generating activity in terms of Altrichter and Gstettner’s (1993) model of action research,
37 effectively developing an action strategy before we knew what the nature of the problem
38 was. The team members had all been mentors (and indeed, trainees) in similar contexts to
39 the mentors and mentees we were working with on the course; consequently, the questions
40 generated tended to be (a) questions we had asked ourselves when we were mentors, (b)
41 questions we ourselves had heard other mentors ask or discuss and (c) questions trainees
42 told us that they had been asked. This initial collection of questions (Figure 1) were, quite
43 deliberately, not refined or rephrased in any way but rather left “unpolished” to elicit
44 responses from active mentors who elected to be involved in focus groups (pre-service
45 teachers were not involved in the focus groups) and later, both mentors and mentees
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3 responding to a questionnaire. Both these data collection methods were used to refine the
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5 questions later on (see Findings section). We saw this decision as being a crucial part of the
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7 action research cycle in that, as Kemmis and Taggart (1992) suggest, we needed to
8
9 acknowledge that our own language and framing of these questions might be two of the
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11 things that required change. We also accepted there would be certain questions asked at
12
13 this sort of first meeting that would be of an operational rather than a strategic or
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15 philosophical nature. Zuber-Skerrit (1996) points out that this is a barrier that action research
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17 approaches often face, and as such, the team needed to be open to ways of incorporating
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19 operational concerns while at the same time being observant of the wider strategic desire to
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21 improve mentor–mentee relationships.
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25 Once this first set of initial encounter questions had been devised, we assembled two focus
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27 groups of mentors to discuss them – one consisting of thirteen mentors and the other eight
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29 mentors. The mentors in the focus group were self-selecting, choosing to attend the focus
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31 group as part of the course development day for new and experienced mentors. All of these
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33 mentors worked in partner schools where pre-service teachers from our course were placed
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35 for practicum purposes. In each focus group, two members of the team discussed the origins
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37 of the first “unpolished” iteration of the questions and then asked the focus group to say what
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39 they thought of them and ways they might be developed to the advantage of the mentor–
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41 mentee relationship. This was, then, a participatory opportunity, which as Morrison (1998)
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43 indicates is a condition for successful action research, but perhaps more importantly, it was
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45 a chance to draw on what Heron and Reason (2008) term the “extended epistemology” of
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47 this wider group. The focus group was a data collection method which would allow us to do
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49 what McKernan (2013) terms a “methodologically eclectic” study typical of action research
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51 projects. The focus group responses were then taken and tabulated (see Figure 2) to revise
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53 the existing questions or add new ones. We took the mentor comments and suggestions as
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55 both adding new knowledge of the mentoring process and a welcome challenge to our own
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57 language and perspectives on mentoring, which allowed us to reflect more on the process.
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3 The next stage of the action research cycle involved distributing the focus groups' version of
4 the questions – a second iteration - to mentors for them to use, along with a letter
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6 introducing the project and inviting both mentor and mentee to use the questions in their
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8 initial encounters. All pre-service teachers were allocated a mentor, and therefore all
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10 pairings would have an initial encounter and use this second iteration of questions to frame
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12 that initial encounter. Although only some of the pre-service teachers were from those
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14 identified as “at-risk” groups, all pre-service teachers participated in the project. This ensured
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16 that any pre-service teacher, regardless of their diversity or needs, would have their initial
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18 encounter structured by the questions developed as part of this project. This development
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20 marked a subtle growth from thinking purely about the at-risk groups we started with to
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22 something slightly more holistic. The project was not concerned with attempting to
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24 demarcate and group the large cohort into different groups. The project was looking at
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26 emerging an approach that would be suitable for any pre-service teacher when they first met
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28 their mentor in that initial encounter.
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33 The project team wanted to assess the nature of how mentors and mentees were using the
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35 questions as part of this project and so devised an online questionnaire to better capture the
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37 range of approaches. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gain an idea of both the way
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39 the questions were used and how both mentor and mentee felt about the questions as they
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41 were formed in this second iteration. The questionnaire consisted of four closed questions
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43 with a range of possible answers and then a space in which the respondent could add
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45 further suggestions for questions which they thought might be asked in an initial meeting (the
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47 nature of the questionnaire is discussed in more detail in the Findings section below). This
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49 gave the research team an easily codable way of seeing how the questions were being used
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51 (Cohen *et al.*, 2002). We wanted the questionnaire to tell us something about the extent to
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53 which the mentor and mentee saw the “first meeting” questions as an opportunity for
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55 *providing a structure, improving dialogue* and ultimately *improving the effectiveness of the*
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57 *mentor–mentee relationship*, which both the self-evaluation data and our own observations
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3 had suggested were the key areas for development. As Ruel *et al.* (2016) note, well-
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5 structured questionnaires provide an opportunity to elicit opinions, beliefs and perceptions of
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7 respondents, and we were clear here that we wanted the respondents to feel free to express
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9 their opinions about the “first meeting” questions that we had devised.
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12 The respondents’ questionnaire answers (n=45 and n=12) were subsequently used to refine
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14 the questions twice more. In this development process, mentors suggested subtle changes
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16 of wording to existing questions; some effectively repeated questions but in a more or less
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18 formal way, while others suggested brand new questions which had not been considered,
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20 and these were added into the new iterations. It is important to note that the *questionnaire*
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22 questions did not change in these two refinements – they asked the respondents to say what
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24 they thought about the opportunity for providing structure, improved dialogue and
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26 effectiveness given each different iteration of the “first meeting” questions. We see this as an
27
28 example of Kember’s (2000) fine-tuning process so important to action research. The
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30 differences between these iterations of the questions are discussed below.
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33
34 The fourth and final iteration (see Figure 3) was an important stopping off point, then, in the
35
36 action research cycle. It was a tangible outcome designed as an attempt to arrest the
37
38 number of male, older and BAME trainees dropping out of the course, but perhaps more
39
40 importantly, it offered an opportunity for reflexivity in terms of both the way mentors and
41
42 mentees established their relationships and the way an action research methodology made
43
44 us, as a course team and our mentors, consider what might have been happening in these
45
46 initial meetings. We see these phenomena as reflective of Bradbury’s (2015) observation
47
48 that evidence in action research is both dialogic and emergent over time. The issuing and
49
50 reissuing of the questionnaire, and the subsequent refinement of the questions for use in
51
52 mentor meetings, allowed us as a course team to strengthen the community of mentors and
53
54 pre-service teachers with whom we worked.
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3 Each initial encounter can only happen once, and therefore, the project took advantage of
4 the fact that two initial meetings happen to pre-service trainees on their one-year course.
5

6
7 Over 18 months, three sets of mentors and their allocated pre-service teachers made use of
8 iterations of these questions during their initial encounters. Finally, it is important to note that
9 this research project received approval through the Ethics Committee of the Institute for
10 Research in Education (IRED) at the University of Bedfordshire. All participants gave their
11 informed consent voluntarily, and no participant has been identified individually in this
12 account of the research, or any other.
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21 Findings

22
23 The findings of the project are represented by the final questions generated and the resultant
24 personalised approach to the initial meeting between mentor and mentee. This section of the
25 paper focuses on telling the story of how the questions were developed. The first iteration
26 (see Figure 1) generated by the course team, as set out in the Methodology section, is the
27 starting point and clearly looks very different from the final iteration (see Figure 3).
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35 **Insert Fig. 1 about here.**
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40 Responses to the initial questions we generated through the focus groups and were
41 generally characterised by a rephrasing of the original question into something more relevant
42 and accessible – in the view of the mentors. It is worth noting that the composition of the
43 focus group (entirely made up of mentors) may have resulted in responses that considered
44 the questions largely from the mentor point of view, and this was a notable limitation to this
45 part of the action research study. As a result of this, it was important to compare and
46 contrast this data with that obtained through the questionnaire, which elicited responses from
47 both mentors and trainees.
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3 The sort of rephrasing suggested by the focus groups meant that some of the questions
4
5 became more exploratory. For example, the question “What do you think you should be able
6
7 to expect from me as your mentor?” was eventually rephrased as two different but equally
8
9 important questions: “Have you been mentored before?” “Tell me about what went well and
10
11 what could have been better?” This was after going through a number of suggested re-writes
12
13 which ranged from “What do you need from me as your mentor?” to “How do you interpret
14
15 the role of mentor?” This sort of discussion and rephrasing process illustrated both the
16
17 diversity of approaches to mentoring and the types of questions that mentors asked and felt
18
19 they should ask. All of the initial questions had a number of amendments suggested by the
20
21 mentor group, and in some cases, we consolidated these into multiple re-wordings. The
22
23 question “What are you most concerned about coming into this placement?” eventually
24
25 morphed into two questions, one of which was actually about the kind of person that the
26
27 trainee was and how this impacted their concerns (see Figure 3).
28
29
30

31 **Insert Fig. 2 about here.**
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33

34
35 Some of the focus group responses did not involve rephrasing the questions at all but rather
36
37 replacing them with tasks. One participant in the focus group suggested that trainees be
38
39 asked to complete a prioritisation or in-tray task rather than asked the question “Would you
40
41 describe yourself as responding to tasks in a spontaneous or organised way (or both)?”
42
43 Similarly, a respondent in response to the question “Do you want time to write down what
44
45 you want to discuss in our mentor meetings beforehand?” put forward the idea of the trainee
46
47 bringing to the meeting an agenda of things they wanted to talk about. Interestingly, this did
48
49 happen on the course but independently of this project and the “first meetings” research.
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51

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53 The second iteration of the questions, refined via the focus groups, was distributed to all
54
55 mentors and trainees in our partnership for use in their initial meetings. This was
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57 accompanied by a questionnaire which, after establishing whether the respondent was a
58
59 mentor or mentee, asked three simple questions:
60

- 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?”

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3 Finally, some suggestions focused on making the meeting as open and honest as possible
4
5 and ways this might be achieved.
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8 Responses to the second question tended to fall into two categories, with the first suggesting
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10 improvements to the layout of the document and the second about the way the questions
11
12 might facilitate (or not) a more open relationship between mentor and mentee. For example,
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14 one respondent suggested that there needed to be a “back-up” set of questions in case the
15
16 relationship between mentor and mentee broke down. As there was an existing process for
17
18 such a circumstance in our course documentation, we decided not to add this to the
19
20 questions but instead re-emphasised it in our mentor development conference.
21
22

23
24 After the third iteration of the survey was distributed, fewer respondents chose to make
25
26 suggestions in these “open boxes” (only four responses for each question as opposed to 14
27
28 and 15, respectively, in the first survey). One might speculate that this demonstrated an
29
30 increased level of satisfaction with the questions, although this assumes that the
31
32 respondents would choose to articulate anything with which they were dissatisfied. Again, a
33
34 number of responses focused on pedagogy and how this might feature in the first meeting.
35
36 As a result of these responses, pedagogy was an aspect that did feature in the final iteration.
37
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39
40 The final iteration of questions (as featured in Figure 3) was, then, a collaborative piece of
41
42 work, a result of our action research project in which we emphasised collaboration among
43
44 university faculty, mentors, and mentees. These questions are now a key element of any
45
46 initial encounter between any mentor and any pre-service teacher on any of our institutional
47
48 teacher preparation courses.
49
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51 **Insert Fig. 3 about here.**
52
53

54 **Discussion**

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57 In this study, we set out by identifying an unstructured and unresearched part of a pre-
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59 service teacher’s experience: the initial encounter with their mentor. We set out to develop a
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3 response to the question “What questions should be explored in the initial encounter
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5 between mentors and mentees?” and through various iterations over several cycles of an
6
7 action research project, we produced a set of questions which are now used throughout our
8
9 institution’s portfolio of pre-service teacher education courses. We present these iterations of
10
11 the questions and the discussion that surrounds them as a way of developing two ideas
12
13 which come out of both the literature and the theoretical frameworks we have presented. To
14
15 return to our conceptual framework, it is first important to note that these questions establish
16
17 a means for trainees to engage in that legitimate peripheral participation which Lave and
18
19 Wenger see as an essential feature of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 40). Second,
20
21 Rogoff’s (1985) three processes of personal development (apprenticeship, guided
22
23 participation and participatory appropriation – but particularly apprenticeship) are, we argue,
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25 facilitated, at least in introductory terms, by a discussion of these questions by mentor and
26
27 mentee.
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29

30
31 Both the discussions of the questions by the participants in the project and their responses
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33 to the survey questions indicated a willingness of the participants to consider the idea that
34
35 there should be a dialogue between mentor and mentee at first meeting. The fact that 50%
36
37 of respondents in the first survey and 60% in the second found the questions to be a useful
38
39 or very useful prompt to promote discussion suggests a need to have a specific agenda for
40
41 these types of first encounters. This also returns us to address Hobson *et al.*’s (2009)
42
43 concerns about mentor preparation. While we acknowledge that discussions are likely to
44
45 move away from the initial questions after a time, the initial questions offer a means by which
46
47 the trainee can be inducted into not only the life of the school, but also the community of
48
49 practice of which their mentor is part. As Tillema and Van Esch (2015) suggest, critical
50
51 awareness of this sort of discussion allows for professional learning. For example, questions
52
53 around pedagogy, curriculum and motivation become an entry point into a professional
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55 dialogue, allowing the trainee to not only participate in that community of practice, but
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57 perhaps to also add to its knowledge base. This dialogue marks a development in the
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1
2
3 pedagogical practice of both the trainee and their pupils, which are both important elements
4
5 of the mentor–mentee relationship identified in the literature (Ingersoll and Strong, 2008).

6
7 This dialogue also allows the trainees to establish themselves in relationship to that
8
9 community as apprentices (in Rogoff's terms) and begin to move towards guided
10
11 participation and participatory appropriation.
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13
14 We also note, however, that a small minority of respondents did not feel that the questions
15
16 were appropriate for the task at hand or did not address the priorities of an initial meeting
17
18 between mentor and mentee. In both the closed and open questions, some participants
19
20 intimated that some mentors did not like the idea of an agenda or structured discussion at
21
22 all, but rather wanted the dialogue to develop organically. We accept that for some
23
24 experienced mentors, this may be a perfectly valid and achievable approach, but we also
25
26 suggest that with an increasing number of inexperienced mentors – in the UK at least
27
28 (Oberholzer, 2019) – there may be value in our final set of questions for some people on
29
30 both sides of the relationship. This position on mentors' part, that they "know" what questions
31
32 to ask, also reinforces the assumptions that they may hold about the mentoring relationship
33
34 and expectations (Searby, 2009). We also accept the possibility that some of the
35
36 respondents may have had experience of mentoring in non-school contexts. We did not ask
37
38 questions about this and suggest that researchers further identify such questions as
39
40 something for inclusion if undertaking similar research.
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42
43

44
45 It is also interesting to note how certain questions developed across the life of the project. In
46
47 our initial discussions as a team, we did not specifically identify pedagogy as something the
48
49 mentor might ask questions about (particularly in the first placement). Instead, we thought
50
51 that it might form part of the discussion of a broader question about the trainees' concerns
52
53 going into the placement. What is particularly interesting is that we did not start to see
54
55 "pedagogy" suggested as the possible basis for a question until halfway through the second
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57 cycle of action research. For example, none of the mentors in the initial focus group used it
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59 as a term, despite suggesting that many of the questions should focus on teaching. We
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1
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3 suggest that some of this movement was caused by what we see as the “background noise”
4
5 of discussions about teaching that surface on the internet and social media. The “slow
6
7 teaching” movement (Thom, 2018), free schools and neo-traditional philosophies of
8
9 education (Watson, 2017) have all impacted what preoccupies teachers on a daily basis,
10
11 and we see the development of this question as being about this influence.
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14
15 These kinds of professional questions permit the mentee to begin to understand the way that
16
17 their might facilitate development of their own identities as teachers. For Rogoff (1995),
18
19 participatory appropriation is a “process of becoming” (p. 141); In other words, it is to do with
20
21 becoming a certain kind of person and thinking about the way that the mentee views things
22
23 like deadlines, communication with colleagues and professional boundaries. As a
24
25 consequence, the professional dialogue that asking and answering the questions provoked
26
27 enabled the mentee to establish how their mentor viewed these professional concerns at the
28
29 same time. Additionally, we argue that until the mentor gets the mentee to answer the
30
31 questions developed by our research (or, at least, ones like them) such as “Is there a
32
33 particular pedagogical approach that you would like to develop in this placement?”, they
34
35 cannot broker the mentee to their wider professional community. In effect, the trainee is
36
37 stuck in a place where professional knowledge is being withheld from them. These
38
39 “potentially asymmetrical relationships” as Kim and Silver (2015, p. 33) describe them,
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41 prevent professional learning from occurring. This is the importance of the questions, then;
42
43 they allow both mentor and mentee to work out where they are in relationship to the
44
45 community of practice. Furthermore, a “reciprocal validation” occurs in this first meeting.
46
47 When the mentor asks the mentee about their experiences, attitudes and views, they are
48
49 validating the mentee as a potential member of the community of practice while the mentee
50
51 is getting an insight into the mentor’s professional knowledge and experience. We suggest
52
53 this validation can be significant, particularly in a second placement, as trainees who have
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55 not perhaps had particularly good developmental experiences in their earlier placements can
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57 receive recognition for the things that they have done well through the initial encounter,
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3 through questions such as “What would you describe as your strengths and weaknesses
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5 and how do you think they might help or hinder you on placement?” Anecdotally, we offer the
6
7 example of one of our secondary physics trainees who was, prior to teaching, an electrical
8
9 engineer. When he first met his first placement mentor and this was disclosed, the mentor
10
11 gave him responsibility for teaching a Year 13 class on electromagnetism. This recognition –
12
13 that the trainee had stronger subject knowledge and real-world application of knowledge that
14
15 could be beneficial to the class – established a positive working relationship for the trainee
16
17 despite subsequent difficulties and challenges that he faced, which are essential for the
18
19 development of a professional community (Douglas, 2014).
20
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22

23 This reciprocal validation is essential, we suggest, for a successful mentor–mentee
24
25 relationship to occur. The traditional approaches to mentoring outlined in the literature
26
27 (mentor selection, pairing, preparation, dialogue, mentor types and roles) can only be
28
29 developed if brokering and validation has taken place between the pre-service teacher and
30
31 the mentor. Overall, one would hope that the normal mentoring process should move the
32
33 mentee from Rogoff’s apprenticeship process through guided participation and on to
34
35 participatory appropriation, but it clearly needs to start from this kind of structured initial
36
37 encounter.
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41 **Conclusions**

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43 The “final” iteration of questions identified above should not, of course, be seen as final at
44
45 all. As action researchers, we see such solutions as simply being waypoints on the route to
46
47 further development. However, for the moment, this iteration is in use in our course
48
49 placement handbook, and mentors and mentees have been using the questions to structure
50
51 their first meetings for almost a year at the time of writing. While the project itself started by
52
53 way of awareness of literature demonstrating that diversity on a course leads to variable
54
55 retention rates, such as lower outcomes for BAME and male trainees who have changed
56
57 career, it ended up being about the way that teacher educators can enhance the initial
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3 encounter *between all and any type of pre-service teacher* and their mentor. Instead of trying
4
5 to define the diversity, we have tried to define the point at which diversity matters – the initial
6
7 encounter. It is also a way of at least addressing some important concerns and allowing for
8
9 the brokering and validation processes that we have described to take place. It is important
10
11 to emphasise that we do not see the questions as a replacement for a long-term sustainable
12
13 model of mentoring outlined in the substantial literature concerning the matter. Rather, we
14
15 see them as a support to these models and processes.
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17

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19 It is also important to emphasise that we see them working as part of a wider, pluralistic
20
21 approach to teacher education (Bates *et al.*, 2018) which seeks to avoid the idea that
22
23 schools are monocultural. We hope to support the development of well-rounded, mobile
24
25 trainees who can work anywhere, and the questions are one tool that can support this
26
27 pluralistic approach. We hope, too, that other teacher educators who share this vision,
28
29 whether based in universities or not, will feel able to use the questions themselves with their
30
31 mentors and trainees and empower them to develop further. The problem of teacher
32
33 recruitment and retention, particularly for the groups who may have been identified as being
34
35 at risk of “dropping out” at the start of this article, is an issue for all teacher education
36
37 courses, and we hope that these questions and the wider findings of this action research
38
39 project will be a starting point in helping other teacher training providers to think about ways
40
41 of addressing these issues. An early premise of this project was that the initial encounter
42
43 was unstructured and there was no substantive literature that focused on this aspect. Yet
44
45 what has emerged is practice whereby the trainee can now be better differentiated for due to
46
47 the mentor having a sharper and more candid insight into the trainee’s prior experiences and
48
49 current approaches to teaching. The project involved collating and distilling the expertise of
50
51 hundreds of mentors and trainees and their experiences of several hundred “first
52
53 encounters”. This means that many of the mentors who now use the questions as part of the
54
55 institution’s approach to teacher education were involved in the project to produce the
56
57 questions in an ongoing action research project. It has been insightful to enable a community
58
59
60

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.

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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.)

Initial Question	Suggestions for re-phrasing	Final focus group phrasing
*What are you most concerned about coming into this placement?	<p><i>What are you looking forward to most about the placement?</i></p> <p><i>What can you tell me about yourself as a person outside teaching?</i></p> <p><i>Who are you – as a person?</i></p> <p><i>What are you looking forward to and what concerns or worries do you have?</i></p>	<p>P1/P2 What can you tell me about yourself as a person outside teaching?</p> <p>P1. What are you looking forward to and what concerns or worries do you have?</p>

Fig. 2 example of focus group process.

Figure 3 – Final Iteration

Question No.	Placement 1 or 2	Question wording
1	P1	What motivated you to do a PGCE?
2	P1/2	What would you describe as your strengths and weaknesses and how do you think they might help or hinder you on placement?
3	P1/2	How are you at managing your time – is this something you feel you need to develop?
4	P1/2	What do you expect to gain from this placement?
5	P2	What are your targets/areas of development from placement 1?
6	P1/2	Can you give me two statements that best describe your approach to work?
7	P1/2	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?
8	P1/2	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?
9	P1/2	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?
10	P2	How were you mentored on your previous placement? Tell me about what went well and what could have been better.
11	P2	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?
12	P1/2	What can you tell me about yourself as a person outside teaching?
13	P1.	What are you looking forward to and what concerns or worries do you have about this placement?

14	P1/2	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?
15	P2	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?
16	P2	What did you like or dislike the most about the experiences you had on your first placement?
17	P2	What would you like to know about the curriculum/SOWs that we use in this department?