Exploring the impact of expert guidance from school-based mentors on student teachers' professional learning

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Abstract

This article reports on research undertaken to understand the impact on primary student teachers' professional learning when school-based mentors explicitly share their expertise through discussing some of the 'Learn how to' statements from the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training, introduced by the Department of Education in 2019 to establish minimum entitlement for all student teachers. Initial Teacher Education has become more school-based and the role of school-based mentors is increasingly significant. Primary student teachers took part in an online survey, and school-based mentors in focus group discussions, to explore the impact of weekly expert guidance meetings and how these might be improved. Student teachers valued learning from school-based mentors when they shared their expertise in an explicit, well-contextualised way but that this practice was not fully embedded across schools. Mentors were keen to share their expertise with student teachers, and identified the importance of structured, dedicated time to discuss the 'learn how to' statements, tailored to individual needs, and for student teachers to identify specific follow-up actions to apply to their developing practice. Mentors identified ways in which such discussions might have greater impact through, for example, developing their knowledge of the curriculum of the ITE provider.

Keywords: expert colleague, expert guidance, Core Content Framework, school-based mentors, Initial Teacher Education (ITE), Initial Teacher Training (ITT), 'learn how to' statements

Introduction and rationale

In response to the introduction of the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (CCF) (Department for Education (DfE, 2019), a university-led provider in the south-west of England asked school-based teaching mentors to explicitly share their expertise with student teachers on placement, through exploring some of the 'Learn How To' (LHT) statements in the framework during weekly mentor meetings. A different aspect of practice (e.g. behaviour management, meeting children's individual needs, motivating pupils) was to be explored each week, with the intention that, over time, mentors could share significant expertise in a range of elements of effective practice in these weekly expert guidance meetings.

This article reports on research undertaken with primary student teachers and school-based mentors, in the Spring and Summer terms of 2021, in order to explore the effectiveness of this approach and to identify ways in which mentors and student teachers might be supported to increase the impact of these focused conversations.

The objectives of this research were to:

- To understand the impact of the weekly expert guidance meetings on the professional learning of student teachers
- To understand the impact of the weekly expert guidance meetings on the professional practice of student teachers
- To identify features of effective practice in relation to sharing expert guidance and how this might be developed further in future.

Policy Context

Following a review in 2011, the existing Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and Core Standards were replaced by a set of streamlined Teachers' Standards, with the purpose of bringing 'clarity and rigour' (Coates, 2011, p.4) and defining 'the

minimum level of practice expected by trainees and teachers from the point of being awarded qualified teacher status' (DfE 2011, p.3). These new Teachers' Standards, introduced in 2012, became the basis for and focus of provision and assessment in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England.

The introduction of the Teachers' Standards was set against a backdrop of rapid change in ITE, in which the 'market' became increasingly diverse and complex, including a wider range of providers and settings and with a growing focus on school or employment-based ITE. In fact, by 2019-20, 56% of postgraduate ITE entrants were on school-led routes (Foster 2019, p.5). Alongside came a change in the language used: the description of 'Initial Teacher Training' (ITT), rather than 'Initial Teacher Education' (ITE), and the description of student teachers as 'trainees', a term now in common usage, which Lofthouse (2018, p.4) describes as 'potentially reductive' in relation to the complexities involved. Furlong (2013, p.85) suggests that 'one of the dilemmas that ITE faces today is how best to provide professional education that is both practical and critical at the same time'. Furthermore, Alexander (2008, p.47) believes that the imposed Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2012) do not leave much room for professional judgement, and characterise teachers as 'technicians who implement the educational ideas and procedures of others, rather than professionals who think about matters for themselves'.

The growth in the number of possible routes into teaching, including a wide range of providers, inevitably led to variation in approaches to ITE, with differing content according to setting and context. *The Carter review* (2015, p.67) identified the need for greater consistency of provision across different providers and recommended the development of a framework of core content. It also recognised that high quality mentoring in ITE is 'critically important' and made further recommendations,

including the development of national standards for mentors to use for self-evaluation, in order to create a shared understanding of the features of good mentoring across the system (2015, pp.58-59).

The National Standards for school-based initial teacher training (ITT) mentors were published in 2016 and were followed in 2019 by the ITT Core Content Framework (CCF), setting out the minimum entitlement 'for all trainee teachers' (DfE 2019, p.5). The framework was not intended to be used for assessment purposes but was presented as the basis for ITE curricula, alongside the Teachers' Standards, which remain the assessment framework.

The CCF sets out a vision for a teacher training and development system in which:

- The ITT Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework (ECF) establish an entitlement to a 3 or more year structured package of support for future generations of teachers;
- Mentoring and support from expert colleagues forms a key element of this multi-year entitlement;
- Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) will continue to be awarded at the end of Initial Teacher Training against the Teachers' Standards; and
- The ITT Core Content Framework and the ECF will be reviewed together in future, ensuring reviews are performed regularly, build on previous iterations and draw on the best available evidence.

(DfE 2019, p.3)

Although the role of the school-based mentor has always been important, the CCF enhances their responsibilities for the delivery of ITE content and specifically places them in the role of 'expert colleague' (DfE 2019, p.5). The LHT practice statements for each standard in the CCF include specific direction that student teachers should

receive clear and consistent mentoring, and discuss, analyse, observe and deconstruct how expert colleagues practise key skills (DfE 2019, p.5). Underpinning this is an emphasis on 'using the best available evidence' under the guidance of their expert colleagues to understand and critique practice (DfE 2019, p.5). The implication of this is that mentors not only need to be expert teachers, able to deconstruct and discuss in detail their own approaches and skills: they also need to be well versed in the requirements of the CCF and the supporting range of evidence, as well as being able to carry out the mentoring role sensitively and effectively to support student teachers in receiving 'structured feedback' (DfE 2019, p.5). In practice, during ITE and especially in the primary phase, the individual mentor is also the person responsible for making an assessment of the student teacher against the Teachers' Standards.

It was noted in *The Carter review* (2015, p.59) that 'methods for identifying or recruiting mentors, training and quality assuring mentoring were variable' and often reliant on good will and a sense of professional duty inherent in practising teachers. However, this may be considered advantageous since 'mentors' affective commitment to the mentorship of pre-service teachers energises efforts to use, study, and integrate theory in their roles as teacher educators' (Sandvik *et al.* 2019, p.8). The Ofsted Inspection framework for ITE places mentors (and their partnership with providers) under scrutiny with an emphasis upon high quality mentoring which 'supports the intent of the ITE curriculum' (Ofsted 2020, p.51), with additional emphasis on the quality of training for mentors. This highlights the onus on schools, and providers, to actively engage with the school-based mentoring process in ITE.

The ITT Market Review, consulted on in 2021, goes further, potentially placing even greater expectations on the role and training of school-based mentors and, arguably, pressure on schools. A key element is the proposed introduction of the 'Lead Mentor'

who will ‘receive intensive training so that they have deep knowledge of the curriculum, the evidence base which underpins it, and the organisation and delivery of the curriculum across the accredited provider’s network’ (DfE 2021, p19). In addition, they will be expected to take a key role in designing and delivering ‘intensive practice placements’ for student teachers and to undertake a formal qualification, or equivalent training (DfE 2021, p.19), which formalises the role to the point of accreditation.

It is within this context that this research study was undertaken, with the intention of understanding the features of clear, consistent and high-quality expert guidance in school-based mentoring and to use the findings to inform debate across the ITE sector.

Research process

The research was undertaken in two stages, with appropriate ethical clearance gained for each stage, and appropriate ethical safeguards put in place to ensure that participants contributed to the study with informed consent and with confidence about confidentiality and anonymity (BERA 2018).

In phase one, primary PGCE and final year undergraduate student teachers took part in an online survey, in which they were asked about their experiences of the weekly expert guidance meetings, the impact of these on their professional learning and professional practice, and any distinctive approaches taken by their mentors that might have impacted positively on this learning. Use of an online survey enabled the research team to gather responses from a cross-section of the student teacher cohort and to identify key issues arising part-way through the first year of the new approach.

In phase two, mentors from partnership schools were invited to take part in focus group discussions, the purpose of which was to explore how mentors had approached the development of weekly expert guidance meetings, to understand how effective they believed these to have been, and to explore ways in which school-based mentors might have more impact through sharing their expertise with student teachers in the future. Six mentors agreed to contribute to focus group discussions; however, as a result of coronavirus numbers rising rapidly in schools during the time of the focus group, three mentors were unable to attend, and the focus group was undertaken with three enthusiastic, committed and eloquent mentors. Use of a focus group enabled the research team to gain rich and valuable insights about the key issues and enabled the participants to learn from each other and from the university-based facilitators about other elements of the ITE provision (Sim 1998).

Findings from survey of student teachers

Student teachers on the primary undergraduate teacher training route were asked to complete a survey towards the end of their final teaching placement, as were student teachers on the PGCE primary teacher training route, towards the end of their second of three teaching placements, both during the spring term, 2021. 79 student teachers on the undergraduate course and 98 on the PGCE course were asked to complete the survey; responses were received from 13 undergraduate and 22 PGCE student teachers. The expectation that specified LHT statements would be discussed during weekly mentor meetings was introduced from the beginning of academic year 2020-21. The statements had been split into three distinct phases of training (one phase for each year of the undergraduate course and one phase for each term of the PGCE

course); mentors and student teachers could select the order in which to discuss the LHT statements assigned to that phase of training.

The survey comprised of the following questions/statements:

- In your weekly mentor meetings, are you engaging in professional discussions based on the 'learn how to' statements from the ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019)?
- As a result of these discussions, what has been the impact on your professional understanding of the role of the teacher and how children learn?
- As a result of these discussions, what has been the impact on your professional practice (for example, a specific aspect of teaching)?
- Identify any distinctive features of your professional discussions of the 'learn how to' statements that have enhanced the impact on your professional learning or practice.

Impact on professional understanding and professional practice: Most student teachers identified particular aspects related to the 'learn how to' statements that had the most impact on the development of either their professional understanding or professional practice, or both. These tended to focus on 'practical' aspects of teaching, such as managing behaviour, assessment, differentiation and SEND. Many of the responses focused on what student teachers had learnt about children, their classes or specific individuals; for example, one respondent noted that 'individual needs support was another one which was really interesting to discuss. I feel that through these discussions, I have a greater understanding of scaffolding and my plans, which helps us to identify how we can ensure everyone in the class succeeds'. These responses might reflect the fact that, on placement and in discussion with a mentor, student teachers had the opportunity to consider 'real' rather than hypothetical

situations, addressing the 'gap' between theory and practice that is acknowledged as a common issue in initial teacher education (Yin, 2019). One student teacher commented that receiving focused input on each area 'in a practical setting [is] in some ways more beneficial than hearing it in a lecture as I am able to put into practice what I have learnt immediately'.

Some of the responses also reflected upon the development of professionalism and a broader understanding of the role of a teacher in the context of school decision making; for example, one student teacher noted that the discussions had enabled them to 'understand more about the thinking and pedagogy behind … teaching policies …'. Another commented that the discussions enabled them to address their own misconceptions and confirm what 'professionalism should look like'. Some of the responses identified significant impact from discussions which progressed naturally from discussion about the LHT statements, considering aspects such as teacher mental health and workload.

The expectation is that student teachers will, following expert guidance, have opportunities to practise using approaches from the LHT statements (DfE, 2019) and a number of the student teachers noted how useful they found it to make connections between the LHT statements and their current practice: this enabled them to consider how these statements were already embedded in their practice and how they might further adapt and enhance their teaching or undertake further independent research.

Features of effective mentoring to address the 'learn how to' statements:

Participants identified a number of approaches taken by mentors which were considered to be particularly beneficial. For example, a number of student teachers noted that their mentor would ask about their personal views in relation to the LHT statement, or how they judged their own practice in relation to the statement, before

embarking on the discussion. They felt that this helped them to make connections between the statement and their own developing practice, so that the discussion was as meaningful as possible. Being given the opportunity to ask questions, as part of the discussion about the LHT statement, was also seen to be valuable by a number of student teachers.

Some student teachers commented on the value of sharing 'ideas' and 'practical examples' to try out in their own practice. This was seen to be particularly beneficial when followed up in further discussions so that student teachers could reflect, with their mentors, on the development of their own practice, following the discussion. Some student teachers noted that they found it useful when their mentors shared related training materials, links to specific literature and opportunities for further discussion with other expert colleagues within the school.

Challenges: Of the 35 survey respondents, just over half indicated that they were engaging in regular professional discussions based on the LHT statements during some or all of their weekly mentor meetings. This suggests that embedding this aspect of the weekly mentor meeting was challenging in some contexts, although some of the student teachers were a little uncertain about whether or not they had discussed the LHT statements or not, suggesting that this feature of discussions was perhaps not explicit.

However, not having an explicit emphasis in the weekly mentor meeting did not mean that discussions based on the LHT statements were not happening at all; for example, five of the student teachers who answered 'no' to the first question identified that they had discussed some of the LHT statements with their mentor, but in a more informal manner. For example, one respondent noted that 'these discussions are automatic with my mentor, not at a specified time … a lot of the focus areas are drip-fed throughout'.

Another respondent noted that, rather than addressing the identified LHT statements for that particular phase of training, they identified statements most relevant to the student teacher's own development priorities in order to 'have genuine conversations about what we had been thinking about'. While these 'ad-hoc' approaches may feel more natural or authentic, the risk is that some statements may not be discussed at all, which is a challenge to the ambition of the CCF (DfE 2019, p.3), which 'defines in detail the minimum entitlement of all trainee teachers'.

One of the most significant challenges identified, which may also explain some of the responses above, was a perceived lack of time available for such discussions, with one student noting 'there is not enough time' and another commenting that it was 'hard to organise a specific time'. Many comments of this type went further, identifying that while there was time available for meetings with their mentor, there were lots of other things to cover within that time which were often prioritised, such as 'lesson observations and feedback' and 'planning'. The many roles of the mentor, as well as the significant time commitment required, are acknowledged by Sandvik *et al.* (2019). In addition, at the time of undertaking the research, many schools were operating a 'bubble' system due to the coronavirus pandemic, which some student teachers identified as making it more challenging to meet regularly with their mentor.

A couple of student teachers identified that they would have found it easier if the points covered by the LHT statements had been modelled to them, rather than discussed with them. A key feature of the CCF (DfE 2019, p.5) is that student teachers should have the opportunity to observe expert colleagues and deconstruct the approach, as well as discuss and analyse with expert colleagues. It may be that the connections between what was observed and what was discussed needed to be explored more explicitly.

One student teacher had been 'told a lot about processes used but often little is shared as to why the process is beneficial'. There may be a number of explanations for this, but Buitink (2009, p.118) suggests that it is common that 'underlying principles are not made explicit'. Timperley (2001, p.112) asserts that 'the difficulty expert practitioners experience in articulating the intricacies of complex skills, such as teaching, are well recognised', but as Sandvik *et al.* (2020) identify, it is crucial that mentors are able to discuss and apply theory, in order to support student teachers most effectively.

Findings from focus group discussions with school-based mentors

As a follow up to the student survey, school mentors were invited to attend a focus group discussion and workshop. The aims for this were to:

- Identify key elements of effective practice in sharing expertise
- Identify ways in which mentors might be supported to enhance impact.

While the central focus for the study was intended to be the CCF, what was striking during discussions was that mentors rarely referred to this document or the LHT statements. Rather, they presented themselves as mentors in a more traditional sense, who support and guide students, as opposed the CCF's vision of 'expert colleagues'. In a study by Parker *et al.* (2021, p.73), this 'identity shift' to mentors seeing themselves as teacher educators was found to be a challenging reform and one that mentors continue to grapple with, in spite of much training.

A number of recurring themes emerged during the focus group discussions and activities with mentors: the role of the lead mentor vs. the role of the class teacher; organisation and structure of mentor meetings; the broader impact of ITE on schools

and mentors; the importance of identifying student needs and facilitating reflection, leading to actions and improvement in practice.

The role of the mentor: The three mentors (referred to as M1, M2 and M3) who participated were all in the 'lead mentor' role, overseeing ITE provision in their schools, rather than working in the teacher-mentor role where the student is placed in their own classroom. The mentors valued this model as it enabled day-to-day dialogue and support to come from the class teacher, and for this to be affirmed by the mentor in the weekly mentor meeting. While the class teacher/mentor role is valuable in facilitating 'direct modelling and scaffolding and daily conversations' (M1), the lead mentor is well placed to direct students to the best role models and examples of good practice across their school, and to provide a more objective viewpoint. M1 particularly expressed enjoyment of engaging in high-level discussions about the philosophies of teaching with student teachers.

The structure of the mentor meeting: The mentors also recognised their role in determining which parts of the school experience were better overseen by the class teacher on a one-to-one basis and which could be better achieved through a well-structured group meeting. For example, M2 regularly met the seven undergraduate student teachers in his school as a group to talk about a focus, sharing each students' experiences and what they had observed in schools, to deconstruct specific, underpinning principles of practice and relate this to the school's ethos and visions. Maynard (2000, p.18) defines 'talking as an important way of learning … talking provides the learner with information not only about how to proceed, but also about meaning, norms and ways of knowing specific to the particular community of practice … or cultural knowledge'. Timperley (2001, p.112) identifies this as a key task for mentors, to 'articulate principles of teaching as they arise in practical contexts for student teachers … and in ways that facilitate student teacher learning about their own practice and how to improve upon it'. M2 identified that such group discussions led to setting clear expectations and targets with each student. Organising groups of

students to observe and discuss practice with subject leads, followed by a group meeting to analyse and deconstruct the approach, was also felt to be beneficial. This follow-up could either be shortly afterwards or at the next mentor meeting.

Having a clear structure in advance of the mentor meeting was felt to be important for the mentor as well as the student teachers, so they could refresh their own subject and pedagogic knowledge in advance of the discussion. As Hobson (2002, p.14) notes, although school mentors may be good teachers, they may find articulating the nuances of their practice to student teachers more difficult, so time to prepare and clarify their ideas before a meeting is important.

Another mentor (M3) met with student teachers all together on Fridays after school, starting with a reflection on the previous week, leading to a professional discussion about what had been achieved/observed: 'conversations that are central to developing student teachers' cognitions that underlie their professional knowledge and performance' (Timperley 2001, p.112). Part of the reasoning for holding the meeting on a Friday afternoon was due to this mentor also being a headteacher. This slot was at a time when they were less likely to be interrupted, but also meant that the whole week could be reviewed. Sandsvik *et al.* (2019, p.20) suggest that when mentors have a strong sense of 'professional and personal identity', it leads to greater effort to find and use time more effectively. The importance of protecting time for the weekly mentor meeting was a common priority for the mentor focus group, as they saw the importance of building the meeting time into the students' weekly timetables. It showed student teachers that they were 'investing in them as part of the community' and they were 'being respected and valued' rather than being 'fitted in' at the end of a day, while also valuing mentors as learning partners and seeing mentoring as an important part of professional development. As one mentor said, 'Well, ultimately, that's what we want, isn't it, for the standard of teaching in [this school] to rise because of the provision you're putting through for the students. It's only going to have a benefit for us in schools.'

Student reflection and action planning: To support the development of students, the mentors discussed the importance of starting from the point of need and identifying the aspects of practice that presented the greatest challenges, either specific to individual or groups of students, or where experience told them 'students usually failed to achieve' (M1). Echoing comments from students, the mentors identified behaviour management, 'classroom presence' and 'taking control' as priorities, rather than elements of practice such as marking, which they argued students could learn how to do effectively by working alongside the class teacher. This meant that rather than beginning with the LHT statements, discussion was driven by feedback from observations and the class teachers, with whom the students worked on a daily basis, and students' own self-evaluation. In this way, the LHT statements were often addressed but not always as an explicit starting point for discussion.

During meetings, students were invited to reflect upon and deconstruct their own practice and that of expert colleagues, and the impact of the advice they had been given by mentors and class teachers. This was identified as a key element of the process. Much in the way teachers would with a class of children, M1 noted that this often required a 'drip, drip, drip' approach and 'the need to keep revisiting'. The implication of this was that focused discussion of some LHT statements was broken down into key elements, with students' practice developed incrementally across the course of the placement. For M2, this was a matter of 'tailoring' the LHT statement discussions, ensuring they were 'a personal thing rather than just a set list of eight things that they might need'.

For the mentors, there was a clear distinction between setting broad or long-term targets and setting immediate action points, in a similar way to the 'goals' identified by mentors in Hudson and Hudson's (2016) study of the mentoring role in Australian ITE. M1 explained: 'When we give them feedback, it needs to be actionable and it needs to be moving them forward'. They explained that this approach depends on a complex combination of expert modelling, discussions with effective practitioners,

ongoing communication between class teachers and mentors, and upon supported reflection and deconstruction of practice on the part of the student.

Thoughts about improvements: Mentors suggested that centre-led pre-placement meetings held jointly with students and mentor meetings were a positive and effective way of sharing key message about placements and how these fit into the overall learning journey of the student. These could be further developed by making the ITE provider's central curriculum more visible to schools. Aligning directed student learning tasks and the mentor meeting LHT focus was felt to be positive, as one mentor relayed their student had become 'very excited because in one of the weeks we talked about the thing their school-based task was on, so they were thrilled' (M1). This joined-up approach would provide opportunity for rich discussions that could be captured and reflected upon by students through a set meeting proforma. Mentors also welcomed wider partnership opportunities to share their practice with each other, to learn from each other and to learn more about the ITE provider's philosophy. This approach might also be seen as an opportunity to develop mentors' professional identities so that they begin to see themselves as expert colleagues in the mentoring role.

Conclusion

This study has shown that student teachers valued learning from school-based mentors when they shared their expertise in an explicit way, through discussion of the CCF 'learn how to' statements, as one of a wide-range of elements that supported their professional learning and development. They particularly appreciated discussing key issues in a 'real' context, with explicit and direct links to their own developing practice. Challenges identified related to the limited time available for such

discussions and the lack of consistency with which such conversations were focused around the LHT statements.

The study also showed that mentors were keen to share their expertise with student teachers, and identified the importance of structured, dedicated time to discuss the LHT statements. They were keen to tailor such discussions to the needs of individuals and identified the importance of these exchanges leading to specific and relevant follow-up actions on the part of the student teachers. In order to develop these expert guidance discussions further, mentors identified that it would be beneficial for them to develop greater knowledge of the ITE provider's central curriculum and for discussion foci to be linked to school-based tasks undertaken by the student teachers.

This study shows that focused discussion of the LHT statements is valued by all parties as a beneficial activity, but that there is some way to go to ensure that these fulfil their potential as well-embedded and impactful elements of the ITE learning experience for all student teachers.

4699 words

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