Initial Teacher Education Mentors as Collaborative Practitioner Researchers: A critical evaluation

Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal

Online First pages 116-128

Tracey Wire, Colin Forster, Rachel Eperjesi and Cathy Burch
University of Gloucestershire

Abstract
The role of the school-based mentor has become more central within Initial Teaching Education (ITE) over recent years and will become even more central to such programmes, with the introduction of new Department for Education requirements from 2024.

This article evaluates a collaborative research project undertaken with school-based mentors working with a university-led provider of primary ITE, in the south-west of England, in which the mentors were supported, through four workshops, to undertake small-scale research projects related to their roles as ITE mentors, during the Spring and Summer terms of 2023.
Data was gathered in the form of post-workshop reflective discussions between lead facilitators and through the use of a focus group interview with mentors, who also produced written reports related to their individual small-scale research projects.

The research shows that ITE mentors value opportunities to interrogate the practice of mentoring through engaging in supported, collaborative small-scale research projects and that such activity might form a legitimate and valuable element of enhanced ITE mentor training.

Keywords
Initial Teacher Education; Initial Teacher Training; school mentors; ITE mentors; collaborative practice research.

Introduction

The role of the school-based mentor has become more central within Initial Teaching Education/Initial Teacher Training (ITE/ITT) over recent years and will become even more significant, with the introduction of new requirements from 2024, as outlined by the Department for Education (DfE) (2022, p.12):

> As trainees spend at least two-thirds of their ITT in a school environment, the knowledge and expertise of the staff that support them while there is clearly a critical factor in trainee development. Given the importance of mentors to overall ITT quality, the ITT criteria 2024/25 include a significant focus on providers' mentoring arrangements.

This article evaluates a collaborative research project undertaken with school-based mentors working with a university-led provider of primary ITE, in which the ITE mentors were supported to undertake small-scale, collaborative research projects related to their roles, during the Spring and Summer terms of 2023. The mentors each identified different foci for their research projects, based on their own interests and development needs.
The objectives of this research were:

Citation
Wire, T., Forster, C., Eperjesi, R. and Burch, C. (2025) 'Initial Teacher Education Mentors as Collaborative Practitioner Researchers: A critical evaluation', *TEAN journal Online First*, pp. 116-128.

- To enable ITE mentors to explore the detail of their own and colleagues' practice mentoring ITE students.
- To support ITE mentors' professional development to improve mentoring in schools.
- To develop ITE mentors' understanding of applied research methods.
- To understand the impact of supported applied research on mentors' knowledge, understanding and practice in relation to mentoring.
- To explore and understand how to support ITE mentors to develop their applied research skills.

Context

In 2011, an independent review led to a replacement of the existing standards for teachers, with a new set of *Teachers' Standards* (DfE, 2011), implemented from September 2012. The intention being to provide a 'clear and powerful expression of the key elements of great teaching' (Coates, 2011, p.4). Since their introduction, the ITE 'market' has diversified, with a wider range of providers and settings; in particular, there has been a significant increase in the number of school and employment-based routes. Long and Danechi (2023, p.11) identify that postgraduate ITE students 'make up 90% of training places' and that, in 2022/23, 56% of these were on 'school-led routes': a significant proportion of ITE entrants. As school and employment-based routes increased, there came a shift in language, at least in some quarters, from 'Initial Teacher Education (ITE)' to 'Initial Teacher Training (ITT)', and from 'student teacher' to 'trainee'. Some have concerns about this, noting that 'training' suggests merely the acquisition of skills, whereas 'education' is more encompassing and supports student teachers to become reflective practitioners (Chitty, 2009).

As the ITE market became more diverse, variation increased between providers, both in terms of content and approach. Sir Andrew Carter, OBE, was thus asked to undertake an independent review of ITT, which resulted in the *Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training (ITT)* (Carter, 2015). Carter made several recommendations, including to 'develop a framework of core content for ITT', in order to address the 'considerable variability in ITT content across the system' (Carter, 2015, p.6). He also identified the importance of high-quality mentoring, making a number of recommendations concerning how ITT partnerships should ensure that 'all trainees experience effective mentoring' (Carter, 2015, p.12), as well as recommending the introduction of national standards for mentors. In response to the report, *The National Standards for School-based Initial Teacher Training (ITT) mentors* (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) were introduced in 2016.

As also recommended by Carter (2015), *A Framework of Core Content for Initial Teacher Training (ITT)* was introduced in 2016 and subsequently superseded by the *ITT Core Content Framework* (*CCF*) (DfE, 2019a), which 'defines in detail the minimum entitlement of all trainee teachers' (p.3). As such, it represents the 'non-negotiable' curriculum for ITE, which providers can then build upon in designing their own curricula, with the *Teachers' Standards* (DfE, 2011) providing a framework for end-of-course assessment.

The DfE (2019a, p.3) identifies the role of the mentor as a 'key element' of training, both during ITE and during the first two years of a teacher's career, covered by the *Early Career Framework* (*ECF*)(DfE, 2019b). The *CCF* comprises 'learn that' and 'learn how to' statements. In addition to opportunities to practise, the 'learn how to' statements make significant reference to student teachers observing the practice of 'expert colleagues' and discussing and analysing with 'expert colleagues' (DfE, 2019a, p.5). While the term 'expert colleagues' does not refer solely to mentors, they are certainly likely to fulfil this role in many situations. The *CCF* also places emphasis on student teachers 'receiving clear consistent and effective

mentoring' (DfE, 2019a, p.5) and the importance of effective mentoring is further confirmed by Ofsted's (2022) *ITE inspection Framework*, contributing to the judgements they make about the quality of education and training. Research undertaken by Forster et al. (2022, p.61) noted that student teachers value the expertise of their mentors in supporting them to meet the *CCF*'s 'learn how to' statements, particularly when 'student teachers could reflect, with their mentors, on the development of their own practice, following discussion'. However, they also identified some challenges in terms of the amount of time available for mentoring, like Sandvik et al. (2019) acknowledging that mentoring can involve undertaking several roles, as well as requiring a significant time commitment in itself.

In 2021, an ITT market review was conducted, with a stated central aim 'to enable the provision of consistently high-quality training, in line with the CCF, in a more efficient and effective market' (ITT Market Review Expert Group, 2021, p.4). The review made several recommendations, including for the development of new quality requirements, that all ITT providers would need to demonstrate, via 'a robust accreditation process' that they could meet on an ongoing basis from September 2024. This recommendation was accepted and applications for accreditation were invited from providers for courses leading to an award of QTS in two rounds during 2022.

The application process included a written submission of intent in four equally weighted areas, one of which was mentoring. Once accredited, stage 2 of the process began, with the aim of checking 'the progress that accredited providers have made in preparing to deliver ITT for the 2024/25 academic year' (DfE, 2022, p.4). There are two key aspects involved in the check: 'reviewing a selection of providers' trainee curriculum materials' and 'assessing readiness to deliver in three key areas of focus for the ITT criteria 2024/25 (mentoring, intensive training and practice and partnerships)' (DfE, 2022, p.4). The value placed on mentoring is further reinforced by its central role in the accreditation process.

The new quality requirements include some specific time allocations in relation to mentoring: student teachers should receive a minimum of 1.5 hours of mentoring every week during placements; general mentors (the school-based mentor) must receive a minimum of 20 hours of initial training, followed by a minimum of 6 hours of annual refresher training; and lead mentors (who will be involved in training and support for general mentors, and for student teachers) must receive a minimum of 30 hours of initial training, followed by a minimum of 12 hours of annual refresher training (DfE, 2022).

Given the challenges above, it seems crucial that mentors be able to make the most effective use of the time available, in order to have maximum impact on the development of their student teachers; it is within this context that this project took place.

Research processes and reflections

The research project consisted of two parallel processes: supporting a group of ITE mentors to develop and undertake their research projects and our own research to evaluate the processes, practicalities, and potential of this kind of supported research/professional development opportunity for mentors, looking ahead to how we might support our mentors post-September 2024. Within this, we ensured that the appropriate ethical safeguards were identified and addressed (BERA, 2018), including gaining informed consent from the mentors for their work to be quoted and summarised in publications and conference presentations.

We began by inviting all mentors from partnership schools to join us in this joint research project, which was standalone continuing professional development (CPD) opportunity, open

to school mentors (who oversee the mentoring in their schools and sometimes work closely with ITE students in their own classrooms) and class mentors (teachers who support ITE students in their classes). We initially recruited eight school mentors to work with us, six of whom remained with us throughout the project.

The mentors came with relatively little prior research experience. One mentor had completed a master's in education, but the majority had not undertaken any research since qualifying to teach. We set up and gave all mentors access to a Teams site, where we stored master documents and resources. Each mentor stored all documents related to their projects in their own folders within the site, including enquiry plans, ethics forms and research articles for reference. This meant that we had access to everything they produced, so that we were able to review their proposals, keep track of progress and offer targeted support.

Having recruited the mentors, we began a series of four afternoon workshops, which took place over the course of three months. Thanks to funding from the University, we were able to reimburse schools for supply cover, enabling them to release the school mentors to attend the workshops; we also provided the mentors with a choice of education research textbook. Two members of the university-based research team (Tracey and Colin) acted as facilitators for the duration of the project. At the end of each workshop, we video recorded our own reflective discussion on the progress of the project and our role in supporting the mentors. This data was then coded to identify themes and implications for future collaborative projects. Between workshops, we reviewed and aided mentors produce documents and made ourselves available to respond to queries and concerns via email, in-person and Teams meetings.

Finally, the mentors produced written accounts of their research, which were collated into a small publication (Wire and Forster, 2023), and four went on, alongside us, to present their work at the University's annual Primary Partnership Conference, attended by colleagues from partnership schools and the University.

The mentors each identified their own focus for their research project, depending on their particular experiences, interests and settings:

- How effective communication between mentors and link tutors might enhance students' professional learning;
- Establishing professional relationships at the start of a placement;
- The impact of supporting student teachers on mentors' professional practices and wellbeing;
- How the work of school and class mentors working together impacts students' professional development;
- Using coaching methods to support student teachers' practice;
- Using evidence from published research to enhance student teachers' learning from lesson observations and feedback.

Workshop 1

This was the first opportunity for us to meet the school mentors as a group. During this workshop, we outlined the project, discussed ethical considerations and practicalities, and helped mentors begin to consider the focus and methodology for each of their projects. We also introduced them to an enquiry-design form, to give structure to their thinking and to enable us to ensure they considered their objectives, ethics and methods of data collection,

and that they were able to present a clear rationale for their choice of research focus (Forster and Eperjesi, 2021).

Reflection on workshop 1

(All quotes in the following reflections are taken from transcripts of our post-session reflective discussions.)

At the end of the first workshop, we identified that, for the mentors, 'it was all about practice', improving their own and colleagues' mentoring practices and procedures, rather than being driven by an explicit desire to become engaged in research. However, it was clear that they were all interested in the research process, and we considered the possibility that they might eventually want to become involved in further research, to develop bigger projects of their own and, perhaps, be enthused to undertake further study in the form of a master's degree or PhD.

This was an early stage in the project, but the mentors came to the workshop having already begun to consider some interesting and challenging issues as potential foci for enquiry. They were all very positive about their role as mentors and the impact they had on student teachers. Nonetheless, they were quick to identify when processes and relationships can go awry and could potentially be refashioned to work better. We were pleased that, with some narrowing and reshaping, all the mentors' ideas that could be workable in terms of time and resources.

While we noted that the group seemed uncertain and to be approaching the project with a sense of trepidation, we concluded that there seemed to be the genuine possibility of developing a 'nice little community' of researcher-mentors.

Workshop 2

This workshop was planned to be much more reactive to the needs of the mentors. We collaborated with mentors to hone their individual foci, objectives and methods, and supported mentors to identify contextual ethical considerations and address these appropriately. The mentors chose to employ a range of methodologies and approaches to gather data, including action research, focus group interviews, and one-to-one semi-structured interviews. By the end of this workshop, all the mentors had identified a clear focus and appropriate methods and were ready to embark on their research projects. They all aimed to take lessons from their projects into their own future practice and to positively impact the practice of others within their schools.

Reflections on workshop 2

Our perception was that, by the end of the afternoon, all the mentors had made significant progress in their thinking since our first meeting. When they arrived, they still seemed quite nervous but positive. They came with some initial, broad ideas about the aspects of mentoring they might focus on, but most of these ideas were still half-formed and potentially rather 'big' and 'nebulous' for the time and resources available. It was our job to 'pin these down' and to help the mentors to develop projects that were tightly focused, potentially useful and manageable. While we worked with the mentors to achieve this, we were concerned that, in some cases, we might be moving them too far away from their original ideas. However, we did want the projects to be successful and there was no sign that this was a matter of concern for the mentors.

We also recognised that this was an emotional journey for us, as well as the mentors. Working in this responsive way, without a formal structure, meant that we had gone into the workshop,

like the mentors, feeling a little anxious as we did not have the same kind of control as in the first workshop and were unsure how it would unfold. The mentors had all ended the afternoon with clearer direction and feeling better than when they arrived, and we reflected that 'there were none of them that didn't need us.' The fact that by the end of the workshop we could see that this approach had worked was cause for some small celebration. We did, however, acknowledge that this would be much less practical had we been working with a bigger group of mentors. We were also particularly pleased that, by the end of the workshop, we could foresee the potential for conference presentations and that each research project could be genuinely interesting and useful to other mentors in our partnership schools.

Workshop 3

The purpose of the third workshop was for the mentors to share their progress and any early findings arising from their projects and for them to begin to write up their research, using a template provided by us. Our role was to facilitate the mentors' initial discussion and to provide any support needed, be that responding to queries, giving advice about next steps or helping with their writing. They each shared some of their early findings and points of interest from their research.

Reflections on workshop 3

It was evident that, while some of the mentors still did not see themselves as genuine researchers, continuing to express 'imposter syndrome', the six were determined to finish their projects. By this stage, we were also seeing the impact of our efforts to guide the school mentors to tighten their foci, although we were concerned that they might become 'a little bit frustrated that they couldn't do more and make a big thing of it'.

We had always wondered if a project like this would be possible without funding to release mentors from school. However, by this point we were beginning to see the potential for this approach to develop mentors and mentoring in line with the requirement for 20 hours of mentor training from September 2024 (DfE, 2022). We pondered if this might 'be built into those expectations of a mentor? As something they have to do, and we have to provide'. We also considered whether mentors should formally write up their research in potential future projects, as they clearly found this time consuming and onerous. However, we could also see that these mentors were 'making sense of what they've done through writing up'. As such, this was potentially valuable for them and for us.

Workshop 4

The final workshop consisted of a further supported writing session and the introduction of a template for the mentors' presentations at the Partnership Conference and time allocated for two additional colleagues (Rachel and Cathy) to run a focus group with the school mentors, to gain insights into their learning and development as a result of engaging in the project. Wire (2022) identifies the value of focus groups, particularly within educational research, as enabling, interactive spaces in which participants can share their thoughts and feelings supported by others in the group and the aim was for mentors to feel they could speak freely about the project to colleagues who had not previously been involved in helping them to develop and navigate research processes.

Reflections on workshop 4

At this stage, we found that the mentors were largely happy to continue writing about their projects with only a little support from us, as they all had some key findings and had identified elements of mentoring practice for future development. They occasionally asked questions and sought reassurance but, for the most part, seemed happy to work independently. We

reflected that the mentors seemed to need the time and space away from school, with each other and us for support, to finalise their work on the project.

Findings from the mentors' small-scale research projects

The mentors' findings from their individual studies can be summarised within three broad themes, related to effective communication, impactful feedback and the challenges and benefits associated with supporting student teachers. Many of the mentors sought to identify ways in which mentoring might be strengthened or developed and reflected Lofthouse's (2018, p.4) view that 'mentoring of student teachers is not a straightforward professional activity'.

Effective communication

Across all the projects, the need for effective communication was regularly identified, with many finding that their participants valued good communication between the 'triangle' of the school mentoring team, the university link tutor and the student, with effective 'follow through' of messaging and with all parties helping the student to keep the relevant feedback at the 'forefront of mind'.

One mentor explored the factors that support student teachers to make a good start to their placements and to quickly establish themselves as members of the teaching team. She identified that there were anxieties on all sides, with student teachers nervous about how the placement was going to go and class mentors concerned about being 'judged' by the student teacher. Her participants identified that it was important for the class mentors to model an appropriate 'tone of engagement' with student teachers, to help establish them in their role as 'teacher' and to model appropriate 'teacher expectations' for the student teacher to learn from.

As demonstrated in the work of Glover et al. (2023, pp.17-18), 'flexible and adaptive' relationships are a key for a smooth placement, for both mentor and student teacher. This was also identified by one school mentor who identified that no two student teachers are the same, and making an early investment in the relationships between student teachers and class mentors was seen as essential to ensure the success of the placements.

Impactful feedback

One mentor utilised her knowledge of coaching to adapt her approach to providing feedback to the student teachers she worked with: instead of providing an analysis of the student teacher's practice, she asked the student teacher to suggest a focus for development and then provided a commentary on what the student teacher said or did in relation to the focus. This led to a coaching conversation, in which the mentor invited the student teacher to reflect on the commentary and identify their own next steps for progress.

Perhaps the individual study with the most potential for further development involved the mentor embedding links to published research in her feedback following observation of a student teacher's teaching. Reflecting the move within teacher education to an approach akin to that within clinical practice (Kriewaldt and Turnidge, 2013; Burn and Mutton, 2015), this involved 'incorporating research *evidence* into practice, in conjunction with *student data* generated by observing, questioning and formatively and summatively assessing student performance' (Kriewaldt and Turnidge, 2013, p.106). In this case, the mentor often, but not always, drew upon research that had been discussed earlier during the weekly mentor meetings (as prescribed by the University) and was carefully selected for its relevance to the student teacher's development priorities arising from the lesson observation. The student

teacher reported this as being very helpful: 'the reading that you allocated me made me really think about it. I felt that I was consciously considering it: it was in the forefront of my mind.' Having initially found that the student did not always follow the links to the suggested research, to increase student engagement, the mentor also provided printed copies of some articles. She deemed this to have had a very positive impact:

> It was clear that the reading had been done and absorbed as the document had been read, highlighted, notes had been made and, most importantly, the following observed lesson demonstrated the suggestions laid out in the research.

Challenges and benefits associated with mentoring

Most of the mentors identified some of the challenges associated with supporting student teachers on their placements, and chief among these was the issue of finding time to do the role as effectively as they would like. This is a recurring theme in research relating to the demands associated with mentoring of student teachers in school (Forster *et al.,* 2022; Marsh, 2022; Glover *et al.,* 2023). One school mentor, who interviewed class mentors about their experience and perceptions of mentoring ITE students, found that some class mentors try to get the balance right by carving out some time for themselves, as well as devoting time to support the student teachers:

> One teacher commented on how she manages her own wellbeing by setting aside a small amount of time each morning which she prefers to spend alone in the classroom: 'I just need my time in the morning ... I just want those 20 minutes on my own in the classroom'. Finding the right balance that works for both the teacher mentor and student teacher is essential, especially considering they will be working as a partnership together for a considerable amount of time.

However, most mentors' research projects also enabled them to identify the potential benefits associated with mentoring student teachers. One specifically aimed to elicit the views of his colleagues about this issue and identified that mentors valued the opportunity to learn from the process, with his participants stating that they valued being able to 'reflect on yourself and your own teaching' and how they 'enjoy seeing the new things that they come up with'. Some of his participants also stated that they derived a sense of satisfaction from supporting student teachers to make a good start in a challenging profession:

> Some student teachers can arrive 'with a lot of doubt in their head and you can sometimes turn that around and give them the confidence' … there are times when you can stand back and 'watch those wow moments' from the student teacher.

Focus Groups: mentor learning experiences

At the end of the final workshop, the mentors took part in a focus group discussion, facilitated by Cathy and Rachel. This was audio recorded, transcribed and coded. Key themes emerging from this element of the research related to the mentors' professional learning about mentoring, their professional learning as novice researchers and their considerations about how we might develop a sustainable approach to enable mentors to undertake supported research projects in the future.

Professional learning about mentoring

The mentors were keen to reflect on their learning about mentoring as a result of their engagement in the project. Much of the discussion related to how, as school mentors, they could now support class mentors to have a greater impact on their students, through applying

their own learning from their research projects. There was also recognition that the opportunity to engage in detailed reflection on one aspect of their mentoring practice is likely to encourage them to be more reflective in their mentoring role in the future, for example, considering 'what impact are these discussions having?' and 'can I approach this differently to have a greater impact?'.

The mentors noted that, since time is always at a premium, there is a need to make things more accessible and 'user friendly' for student teachers, with one commenting that, due to the relatively short time student teachers are in school, mentors want it to be as beneficial to them as possible. She felt that the project had enabled the mentors to reflect on their own practice as to how they could make the student experience the best it can possibly be. Another felt that the project had made her more aware that: 'the smallest things seem to make an impact, which I wasn't really aware of', and referenced the impact of preparing photocopies of published research for student teachers to read.

One commented that having a student could be a considerable time commitment. Even more so if a student is struggling with personal issues or anxiety and that this could be quite overwhelming for some mentors: 'What potentially is doable can very quickly become not doable ... you might feel a little bit overwhelmed or out of your depth ... it can be quite emotionally laborious'. Surveys demonstrate that there are a growing number of university students being both diagnosed with or self-identifying as having mental health problems (Gov.UK, 2023; Lewis and Bolton, 2023; Student Minds and Alterline, 2023). This being the case, it is likely that mentors will experience an increase in their 'emotional workload' going forward, that they might feel ill-equipped to deal with in terms of both time and expertise.

The mentors noted that students are all different and come to placements with varied prior experiences, and that consistent messages were key to student success, particularly given that both students and mentors are very busy, as already noted. For some, this was a key part of the motivation to be part of the project, so that they could 'make it easier for them [the students]', while also trying to 'push them further, to stretch them' as teachers.

Learning as novice researchers

As a group, the mentors felt that there were many parallels between working on the research project and their work in school: 'I didn't feel that it was too far away from what we do anyway. It was just putting it into a different context with students rather than our own teaching practice'. Another commented that teachers are always learning: 'It takes a long time ... for students to understand that you can't get there and finish: there's no finish line as a teacher'. Another observed that teachers are always reflective in schools, trying to improve systems, but that making it more formal through the project and discussing it with others was an interesting and useful process.

Most of the mentors commented that the student teachers were keen to be involved in the research, to share what they felt, to feel listened to and taken notice of. Mentors suggested that the student teachers felt that, as the research was going to be written down and somebody else is going to read it, it must be important. This highlights the importance of giving each student teacher a voice during placements, as they have much to contribute in relation to their own learning.

One mentor felt that being given the time to think in greater depth about their own practice in terms of students was helpful, while another felt that sometimes she did not reflect upon her own teaching as much as she should, but the project had allowed her the time to observe

and to think: 'But do I see myself as a researcher? I think it's just ongoing learning. I think I'm always researching, then. If I'm a researcher today, then I'm always a researcher.'
One mentor identified that writing up her project and preparing her presentation had extended her learning further than just carrying out the research: 'It allowed me to reflect more on what I was doing and the effect I was having. It allowed me to take time to do that, which I wouldn't have done otherwise'. This aligns with Coghlan's (2019, p.172) description of the process of writing up research as a 'whole new learning experience' and with our own thoughts following Workshop 3, that the mentors were 'making sense of what they've done through writing up'.

Potential for sustainable approaches to engaging mentors in research projects
All the mentors were clear that they would like to work on a research project again in the future. One mentor mentioned that, while she had initially found the *idea* of it quite 'stressful', the reality was quite different. The mentors agreed that they had found the experience interesting, enjoyable, worthwhile, and a good opportunity to network. They valued the 'headspace', time away from school to reflect, and having time to think about and analyse their findings. As one observed: 'you never get time at school, ever'. In particular, the mentors valued meeting as a group away from school, rather than being given money to pay for supply and staying in school where, one commented, 'you know full well you're going to sit in the staff room and be pulled for something'. Meeting as a group enabled them to discuss and share with others, rather than analyse issues on their own.

One mentor commented that she would like work with the same group again in the future, 'because I think it takes a while to establish a group and get into sharing with other people'. Others agreed that it would have been useful to have more discussion before deciding on their project focus; that spending more time sharing ideas of what the focus might be could have extended their thinking, perhaps leading to a joint research project with the same focus across multiple settings. The mentors recognised the inherent tensions and trade-offs between working on individual projects that enabled them to pursue their own interests and the potential benefits of working together on a shared focus.

All participants commented on how useful they found the resources that had been provided, with one mentor describing them as 'very, very self-explanatory ... They've [Tracey and Colin] been very much, "Follow this structure. You can't go wrong"'. They stated that this approach helped relieve anxiety, with one stating: 'At no point have I left any of the meetings and gone, 'Oh God, I don't know what to do next', because, actually, you've got Colin and Tracey to talk it through and they can explain exactly where we're going next'.

One mentor felt it might have been beneficial to have a short, fortnightly online meeting to discuss progress and address issues. This idea was popular with the group, as some said that, when they attended the face-to-face sessions, they were worried that everyone else was far ahead of them; a brief check-in every fortnight might have been reassuring. In contrast, one commented that if all the mentors had been taking part in a collaborative project, regular check-ins would have been particularly beneficial in providing support and motivating participants, but that, for this project, it would not have been so helpful, as they each had a separate focus.

The mentors were aware of the time constraints of the research project and identified that, if they were to undertake a similar project in the future, they would be able to plan the timings more effectively in line with the planned student placements. Bearing in mind the different timings of the various undergraduate and postgraduate placements, one mentor suggested

that a collaborative research project might work well for mentors working with student teachers on the same placement. This demonstrates a shift in the mentors' thinking, in terms of what is feasible and manageable, aligning with our own reflections after Workshop 2, where the mentors all benefitted from support in narrowing and tightening their research focus.

As a group, the mentors thought that, with preparation and planning, it would be possible to conduct research of this nature without funding for supply cover, as part of mentors' CPD. Several suggested that class mentors might also be interested in taking part as an element of their CPD, particularly if they had ownership over the project, and possibly more so if there was no expectation to write up the research, although, as identified above, this was an important stage of the reflection process for some mentors.

One mentor noted that, given the new requirements for ITT, providing mentors with opportunities to engage in practice-based research would work well: 'You'd almost have to post-2024 ... actually there's going to be a lot more training happening from your mentors ... they [the mentors] have to be on the top of their game on that kind of thing and up to date with research and developing their own practice'. Another mentor suggested that, if the research counted towards the hours that they had to achieve with the new requirements for mentor training, then it could work well.

There was consensus that it was essential to get headteachers on board, by demonstrating the impact of research. Potential positive impacts cited included improving the practice of student teachers who might be future employees, more effective and improved experiences for class teachers, and contributing to improving systems. The group felt that if headteachers understood these advantages, they would be more open to providing time for their staff to engage in relevant research.

The mentors noted the importance of support from the facilitators of the project, suggesting that this would be needed when engaging other mentors in this process in the future, with one noting that this could perhaps 'all be done online' if there was no funding for supply cover. Having someone that 'you can contact … at any time' was identified as being significant to the success of the mentors' projects, along with someone 'making you believe you can do it'.

Conclusion

At the end of the four workshops, we reflected that, given the requirements of post-2024 mentoring and mentor support, an approach like this might effectively become part of a programme of mentor training, with the following considerations identified through this research:

- Mentors value support to keep their small-scale research projects manageable and focused
- Mentors value working as part of a group
- Projects might be either individual or shared across mentors with similar interests
- Appropriate frameworks and templates help mentors to identify a clear focus, relevant research methods and appropriate ethical safeguards
- Writing up findings, however succinctly, aids reflection and impact of professional learning and supports dissemination.

Acknowledgement of funding

This research was supported by a grant from the University of Gloucestershire's Enhancing Research Culture Fund.

References

British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.* 4th edn. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018 (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Carter, A. (2015) *Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training (ITT).* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/carter-review-of-initial-teacher-training (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Chitty, C. (2009) 'Initial teacher training or education? ITT or ITE?', *Forum,* 51(2), pp.259–262.

Coates, S. (2011) *First Report of the Independent Review of Teachers' Standards: QTS and core standards.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-teachers-standards-first-report (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Coghlan, D. (2019) *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organisation.* 5th edn. London: Sage.

Department for Education (DfE) (2022) *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Provider Guidance on Stage 2.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-provider-guidance-on-stage-2 (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Department for Education (DfE) (2019a) *Initial Teacher Training (ITT): Core content framework.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-core-content-framework (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Department for Education (DfE) (2019b) *Early Career Framework.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/978358/Early-Career_Framework_April_2021.pdf (Accessed: 01 August 2023).

Department for Education (DfE) (2011) *Teachers' Standards: Guidance for school leaders, school staff and governing bodies.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Forster, C. and Eperjesi, R. (2021) *Action Research for Student Teachers.* 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Forster, C., Wire, T., Eperjesi, R., Hollier, R., Howell, E. and Penny, J. (2022) 'Exploring the impact of expert guidance from school-based mentors on student teachers' professional learning', *PRACTICE*, 4(1), pp.56–66.

Glover, A., Jones, M. Thomas, A. and Worrall, L. (2023) 'The triad of success factors that can strengthen student teacher mentoring', *Educator Perspectives,* 3, pp.15-20. Available at: https://oro.open.ac.uk/90535/1/The_triad_of_success_factors_%20that_can_strengthen_ST_mentoring_2023.pdf (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

GOV.UK. (2023) *Academic Year 2022/23: Initial teacher training census.* Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/initial-teacher-training-census/2022-23 (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

ITT Market Review Expert Group (2021) *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Market Review Report.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review-report (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Kriewaldt, J. and Turndge, D. (2013) 'Conceptualising an approach to clinical reasoning in education', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(6), pp.103-115.

Lewis, J. and Bolton, P. (2023) *Research Briefing. Student Mental Health in England: Statistics, policy and guidance.* Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8593/CBP-8593.pdf (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Lofthouse, R.M. (2018) 'Re-imagining mentoring as a dynamic hub in the transformation of initial teacher education: The role of mentors and teacher educators', *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 7(3). pp. 248-260.

Long, R. and Danechi, S. (2023) *Initial Teacher Training in England: Research briefing.* UK Parliament. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06710/ (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Marsh, B. (2022) 'Understanding the professional learning of beginning teachers: maximising learning in a context of systematic constraints', *Buckingham Journal of Education*, 3, pp.9-33.

Ofsted (2022) *Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Inspection Framework and Handbook.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-education-ite-inspection-framework-and-handbook/initial-teacher-education-ite-inspection-framework-and-handbook (Accessed: July 2023).

Sandvik, L.V., Solhaug, T., Lejonberg, E., Elstad, E. and Christopherson, K-U. (2019) 'Predictions of school mentors' effort in teacher education programmes' *European Journal of Teacher Education,* 42(5), pp. 574–590.

Student Minds and Alterline (2023) *Student Minds Research Briefing – February 2023.* Available at: https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/student_minds_insight_briefing_feb23.pdf (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Teaching Schools Council (2016) *The National Standards for School-based Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Mentors.* Available at: *https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536891/Mentor_standards_report_Final.pdf* (Accessed: 01 July 2023).

Wire, T. (2022) '"They don't need to know that." Focus groups as a model for teacher-led research and curriculum consultation', *PRACTICE,* 4(1), pp.42–55. Doi: doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2021.1896344.

Wire, T. and Forster, C. (eds.) (2023) *ITE Mentors Researching ITE Mentoring*. Cheltenham: University of Gloucestershire.