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Jeanne Maree Allen
Griffith University

Simone White
Monash University

Cheryl Sim
Griffith University

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Project Evidence: Responding to the Changing Professional Learning Needs of Mentors in Initial Teacher Education

Jeanne Maree Allen
Cheryl Sim
Griffith University
Simone White
Monash University

Abstract: This positioning paper seeks to contribute to the knowledge base of the changing professional learning needs of supervising or mentor teachers in initial teacher education. To do so, we draw from the work of Project Evidence, an Australian Office of Learning and Teaching funded project, designed to support teacher education through the development of a professional learning website. Our focus in this paper is our growing understanding of the complex work of teachers as they navigate new supervisory and mentoring roles in the current education context of high stakes standardisation. We examine the implications for their changing work practices within the policy imperative to build effective school-university partnerships in teacher education. Within this context, we discuss the ways in which Project Evidence has attempted to (re)position the emphasis of the work of the mentor teacher away from the dual role of assessor and supervisor to encompass their own professional learning.

Introduction

Unlike in some countries, for example England and the United States, initial teacher education (ITE) in Australia remains located within the higher education sector. Pre-service teachers typically complete a four year Bachelor of Education degree or a post-graduate two year Master of Teaching degree. They spend the majority of their time learning at the university site with some time spent in schools. Over their degree they complete mandated practicum days or professional experience (a term we use throughout this paper), usually constructed in block periods (of, for example, three weeks). Pre-service teachers in schools are typically assigned a supervising or mentor teacher who takes the main responsibility for mentoring and assessing their professional learning, while the university takes responsibility for assessing the course/program work and ultimately awarding the degree. The processes for selecting mentors and matching them to pre-service teachers are generally ad hoc. To date, there is little to no professional development required of mentor teachers in order to supervise/mentor a pre-service teacher.

Following international trends (see, for example, Zeichner, 2014), this type of university-led delivery model has come under increasing public scrutiny and critique, with calls for more alternative pathways into teaching (for example, Teach for Australia) and more pre-service teacher time to be spent in schools. With such calls for more time in schools comes a heavier emphasis and greater responsibility on the classroom teacher to be more involved in ITE through the provision of increased support to pre-service teachers. Underpinning current debates about the best place/s to learn to teach, and with whom, are the

recurrent issues of how best to link theory and practice, and persistent questions about how schools and universities can most effectively serve as sites of learning to teach. Zeichner (2014) states that these debates are:

... concerned with the most basic questions about teaching and teacher education, such as the nature of the role for which we are preparing teachers, who should prepare them, when and where should this preparation take place, and what should be the content of the preparation programme. (p. 551)

These types of questions are not new; indeed, they revisit in many ways the different approaches of the “apprenticeship” and “laboratory” models as described by Dewey (1904) over a century ago. In the apprenticeship or traditional model, the pre-service teacher is positioned, as the name implies, as an apprentice to a “master teacher,” fostering what some have described as a technicist view of teaching. As Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) note:

The focus [in this model] was placed firmly on student teachers mastering skills, techniques and methods of teaching. This traditional approach to professional experience stems from what Zeichner (1983) has described as a behaviourist orientation to teacher education. In this performance based or competency approach the skills (or microskills) relevant to the act of teaching are specifically defined. (p. 1801)

In the laboratory model, practice in schools is viewed more as an opportunity for inquiry and reflection by both the pre-service teacher and the mentor teacher. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) describe this type of model as “a reflective orientation” in which “student teachers go beyond a consideration of the technical skills of teaching to consider the moral and ethical issues involved in teaching and learning in a particular social context” (p.1802). As co-collaborators in *Project Evidence*, we endorse a “laboratory” model and extend upon this, using a community of practice approach drawing on the work of Wenger (1999). We acknowledge that this approach however requires significant support and professional learning for mentors and that the enactment of such models is not easy within high stakes testing and standardisation.

Australian Policy Context: Implications for Initial Teacher Education

Finding themselves under increasing accountability measures and pressures, teachers often express concern about their capacity to provide an effective environment in which to support and mentor those in pre-service teacher education. Coupled with this is the heightened attention on the role and work of mentor teachers, which has come about through the increase in emphasis on pre-service teacher time in schools. ITE mentoring has also become increasingly pivotal politically in the endeavour to improve teacher education, as evidenced, for example, in the 2014 report on Australian initial teacher education (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group [TEMAG], 2014), which identified the need to establish more structured and mutually beneficial partnerships, with mentoring highlighted as a key driver of change. In its response to the report, the Australian Government stated:

To ensure new teachers are entering classrooms with sufficient practical skills, the Advisory Group recommends ensuring experiences of appropriate timing; length and frequency are available to all teacher education students. Placements must be supported by highly-skilled supervising teachers who are able to demonstrate and assess what is needed to be an effective teacher. The Advisory Group strongly states that better partnerships between universities and schools are needed to deliver high quality practical experience. (Department of Education and Training, 2015, p. 7)

In this context, it is understandable that teachers report experiencing significant role pressure in effectively fulfilling the responsibilities associated with mentoring pre-service teachers.

The ITE reform agenda has been building for some time now. The Australian work undertaken in *Project Evidence*, a professional learning website designed to support teacher education, was contextualised in two major international teacher education policy reform movements. The first, following the lead of England, is an increasing focus on school-university partnership models and a focus on teacher practical skills, described as “a practicum turn” (Mattsson, Eilersten, & Rorrison, 2011), with its shift towards more school-based and, in some countries, school-led ITE. The second, through the measurement and accountability movement, is the move towards high stakes testing and standardisation of teaching and teacher education (see, e.g., Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2014; United Kingdom Department of Education, 2011).

As such, these two movements have placed a greater focus on the role and work of the mentor teacher. The shift in reforms towards constructing ITE as a shared enterprise across schools and universities, for example, has highlighted a number of tensions that exist between the two sectors, including how stakeholders view and enact their roles and responsibilities (Allen, 2011; Montecinos, Walker, & Maldonado, 2015). Our interest in this paper is focused squarely on mentors and on how their work and practices are being (re-)conceptualised and represented in current policy times, and the associated professional learning implications. We begin this investigation by providing an overview of the literature around ITE mentoring and discuss some of the changes occurring within the partnership and standardisation agenda to provide the context for the work of *Project Evidence*.

Mentoring in ITE

As mentioned earlier, during their professional experience placements in schools pre-service teachers are usually appointed to experienced teacher/s as their central point of contact. The latter, who have been named by many terms in the literature, including co-operating teachers, supervisors and, more commonly in recent times, mentors, play a significant role in the transition from pre-service teacher to graduate teacher. How mentoring models are constructed and implemented varies significantly across schooling contexts (Ambrosetti & Deckers, 2010; Wang & Odell, 2002), which is to be expected given the myriad structural, teaching, learning and pedagogical approaches undertaken in schools, nationally and internationally. However, questions inevitably arise around the role and responsibilities of mentors, and the type and level of support that is provided to them in their mentoring role. While there is a plethora of literature around ITE mentoring, a shared understanding about the changing role that mentors play in teacher preparation and their professional learning needs is still lacking. Hudson (2013) refers to ITE mentoring practices as “haphazard” (p. 363) and notes that mentors “do not require any training or further qualification whatsoever. Indeed, there is no standard for mentoring in Australian education systems (or elsewhere)” (Hudson, 2010, p. 39). In principle, this need not necessarily be perceived as problematic (Bearman, Blake-Beard, Hunt, & Crosby, 2007; Lentz & Allen, 2007); commentators such as Bearman et al. (2007), for example, suggest that, instead of expending effort reaching total agreement about a precise definition of mentoring, it is sufficient for researchers to agree on the core components of a definition, provided they are explicit about the divergent elements that constitute their own local definitions. While we agree that context matters (as we show below), we also argue that with the growing move towards national Standards, there would appear to be a pressing need for a more transparent,

rigorous approach to be articulated for mentors working with pre-service teachers within and across diverse contexts. Additionally, we need to broaden the understanding of professional learning of mentor teachers rather than to view this as simply “training” mentors to use the Standards as a form of assessment compliance measure alone.

Until recently, the responsibility for gathering evidence and judging pre-service teachers’ performance during their professional experience has been an often muted and largely unchallenged issue. A common practice has been that school staff (generally the assigned mentor/s or supervisor/s) assess the pre-service teacher’s practice in accordance with the requirements stipulated by the university. While contact is usually made between the university and school in relation to the professional experience placements (through school visits and the like), the onus to assess the pre-service teacher rests predominantly on the mentor teacher¹. In Australia, the introduction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2014) has led to increased scrutiny, on the one hand, on the quality of mentoring in relation to the decisions made to form valid and reliable judgements about pre-service teachers’ achievements against the Graduate Standards, and, on the other, on the provision of direction and support provided in this regard by universities.

One of the resulting challenges for mentors in this context is that they are now required not only to fulfil the dual role of mentoring and assessing, but also to perform the latter in a highly regulated assessment environment. As Le Cornu (2010) comments, “one might argue that although the role of mentor teacher has not changed too much, the responsibilities associated with the role have” (p. 200). This brings us to the vexed issue of identifying the primary purpose of mentoring in ITE—is it mentoring or supervision, or both?

Our preference for the term *mentor* in this paper is in acknowledgement of the complexity of the role, insufficiently captured, in our view, in the notion of supervisor alone. It is worth noting, however, that the APST refer to *supervisors* rather than mentors, which signals that the former term will remain part of the nomenclature into the foreseeable future. This fact notwithstanding, the term ‘supervisor’ can be seen to suggest a narrower, more confined construct that fails to encapsulate the “complex social interactions that mentor teachers and pre-service teachers construct and negotiate for a variety of professional purposes and in response to the contextual factors they encounter” (Fairbanks, Freedman, & Kahn, 2000, p. 103). This is a contested notion, however, and one that is not confined to ITE (see, e.g., Bray & Nettleton, 2007; Naweed & Ambrosetti, 2015; Walkington, 2005). In their study of several health professions, for example, Bray and Nettleton (2007) concluded that mentors commonly experience role confusion in carrying out the role of both pastoral and collegial mentor and clinical assessor.

A number of commentators point to the same dichotomy in ITE (Bryan & Carpenter, 2008; Colley, 2002; Maynard, 2000; Yayli, 2008), which Bradbury and Koballa Jr (2008) argue places mentors and pre-service teachers “in a confusing and untenable position” (p. 2136). It has been long established that, through their work in practice, mentors and pre-service teachers negotiate and construct the role of the mentor (see, for example, Monaghan & Lunt, 1992). However, with the devolution of teacher education to a more intrinsically shared practice between universities and schools, and with the associated ascendance of the importance of mentoring in ITE, universities are now being called upon to play a greater role in providing support to mentors, particularly through professional learning, and in fostering and sustaining communication between mentors and pre-service teachers (Bradbury & Koballa Jr, 2008).

¹ In accredited Australian ITE programs, however, the university holds final responsibility for the award of grades.

The importance of building productive relationships is not only about the internal school dynamics during the placement. The development of effective partnerships between university teacher education institutions and the schools where placements are negotiated needs to be part of any endeavour involving valid and reliable assessment of the pre-service teacher. Both sites provide learning experiences that are then assessed; and the learning developed in one site is significant to the learning occurring in the other. Thus, both sites affect the quality of the learning that occurs and are important to the assessment results for a pre-service teacher. It is within this context that *Project Evidence* emerged as a professional learning response to the need for an evidence base for mentor teachers (and other stakeholders) in making judgements against the Standards while supporting pre-service teachers.

Project Evidence

Project Evidence was funded between 2010 and 2012 by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) grant² to respond to and support those engaged in the wide range of school settings in which ITE professional experiences occur. The key objective was to develop a professional learning site that enables those who are engaged in teacher education to examine and develop their understanding of assessing and making judgements about pre-service teachers' practice during professional experience. An Office of Learning and Teaching extension grant³ (2013-2014) enabled some of the project team to further extend and develop the website and promote its usefulness as a professional learning tool. The website is available at <http://teacherevidence.net/>. We consider both projects in this paper.

The *Project Evidence* site is comprised of five learning modules targeted towards the role and work of mentor teachers and inclusive of pre-service teachers and teacher educators. The five modules deal with: professional learning; professional standards; professional roles; evidence; and making judgements. Included across the modules is an array of resources in the form of video clips of pre- and in-service teacher practice, textual narratives, inquiry questions and reflection activities. One of the key purposes in developing *Project Evidence* was to address the complexities of assessing professional experience placements as a collaborative enterprise between university academics and experienced mentor teachers. We sought to develop shared understandings of what constitutes, in a school setting, valid evidence for making judgements about an individual pre-service teacher's performance as measured against the Standards. As outlined on the website:

[Project Evidence] has been designed as a place for professional learning, providing a range of information, activities and resources to support the school-based [mentors] ... university-based teacher educators and pre-service teachers who seek to improve the partnerships that are so critical to the development of future teachers. (<http://teacherevidence.net/>)

The development of *Project Evidence* was predicated on the need to respond to the requirements of the current context of standardisation, and the outcomes of the project were a direct result of seeking to clarify and support mentors' responsibilities for both the knowledge building of pre-service teachers and, importantly, for making evidence-based judgements about their achievements.

² Sim, C., Freiberg, J., White, S., Allard, A., Le Cornu, R., & Carter, B. (2012). *Using Professional Standards: Assessing work integrated learning in initial teacher education [online resource]*. Melbourne, Vic: ALTC.

³ The project team for the extension grant was C. Sim, S. White, J. M. Allen, and W. Lang.

A Participatory Professional Learning Model

The original *Project Evidence* team conceptualised and developed what they referred to as a Participatory Professional Learning (PPL) model (Figure 1), acknowledging the role of shared learning and joint construction involved in learning what it means to teach within a “collegial learning relationship instead of an expert, hierarchical one-way view” (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008, p. 1803).



Figure 1: The Participatory Professional Learning Model

This model then enabled the next project team (authors of the current paper) to address the challenge of making evidence-informed decisions within the multi-dimensional community of practice (Wenger, 1999) of professional learning. The first project team established three state-based communities of practitioners, each facilitated by two members of the project team, which were referred to as Communities of Reflective Practitioners (CRP) (Wenger, 2000). Each CRP consisted of ten mentor teachers drawn from a range of diverse schooling contexts (for example, rural, regional and urban). The selection of CRP mentors was based on their record as experienced and expert mentor teachers who supported the professional development of pre-service teachers in their particular school sites. The three CRPs worked to consider the key questions embedded in the PPL model and to develop an evidence base that was pertinent both at the state and— through working collaboratively and sharing their findings —national levels.

The primary goal of the community of practice approach used in this model, as Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley (2003) explain, is to promote dialogue and inquiry for the purpose of supporting a learning environment in which practice is improved. The clear intention of both projects was to co-design with mentor teachers. Key features of the community of practice model were drawn from the literature and can be summarised in terms of four core elements required for effective professional collaboration and knowledge building: (1) knowledge is generated and shared within a social and cultural context (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Palincsar, Magnusson, Marano, Ford, & Brown, 1998); (2) understanding and experience are in constant interaction (Australian Government, 2005; Buysse et al., 2003; Schön, 2003); (3) dissemination of knowledge occurs in practice environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991); and (4) reflection and critical thinking are enabled through interaction (Wenger, 1999). Accordingly, the project’s design was based on a collaborative, iterative process, using strategies whereby participants were encouraged to actively reflect on their own practices through dialogue with their peers (Le Cornu, 2009).

The development of the model was a means to reposition the professional learning of mentor teachers and their pre-service teachers together in a “third” or “hybrid” space of learning to teach. Hybrid space is founded on the notion of “in between spaces” that exist in the “overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). In our project, the *domains of difference* applied in the perceived, traditional education divides between: university and school; course curriculum and professional experience; teaching and teacher education; and teacher and pre-service teacher. As Zeichner (2010) notes, “hybrid space is required to overcome the traditional dichotomy of academic and practitioner knowledge and to resolve one of the central problems that has plagued university-based teacher education, namely, the disconnect between the campus and school-based components of programs” (p. 89). Rather than adopt an either/or approach, hybrid spaces enable a “both and also” (Soja, 1996) approach, allowing multiple stakeholders such as pre-service teachers, teachers and teacher educators to learn *with* and *from* each other. Thus, the work done in *Project Evidence* was conceived of and enacted in a multi-dimensional approach, as illustrated in Figure 2.

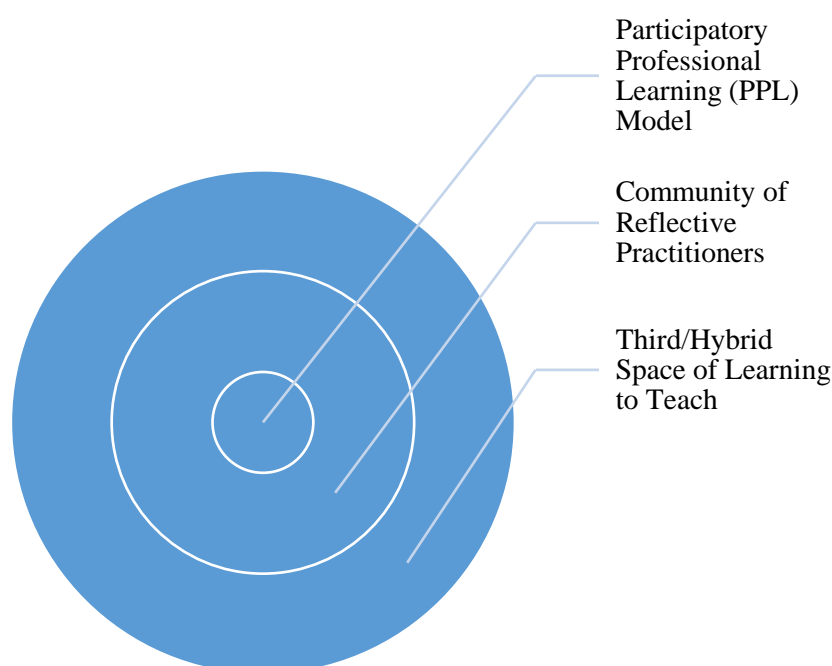


Figure 2: The *Project Evidence* multi-dimensional approach

Importantly, developing and engaging in the PPL model within this broader collaborative space enabled us to incorporate the Professional Standards without creating tensions that often occur when changes, such as the introduction of the Standards, are perceived as imposed.

The parameters of the PPL model highlight the importance of context in learning to teach. As Kennedy (1999) notes, the main point of learning in professional experience for teachers is to move from an intellectual understanding to enactment in practice. Doing so is contingent on the situation in which pre-service teachers find themselves, and provides a challenging context for both pre-service teachers, who are required to enact their understandings in practice, and for their mentor teachers, who must make judgements about their achievements. In summary, the *Project Evidence* approach sought to:

- acknowledge the experiences of all stakeholders;
- develop resources informed by the ideas and practices from communities of experienced teachers and pre-service teachers; and

- enable the knowledge and best practice about professional learning to be shared rather than limited to single sites.

The PPL model highlights the shift in thinking about the work of mentoring as that of both learning and teaching *and* assessing, enabling mentors to view their work with pre-service teacher/s as an opportunity to provide guidance and support through a platform that requires them to make their own practice explicit.

The Way Forward

The conditions for effective and sustainable mentoring practices have been identified by researchers such as Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson (2009) who argue for stronger contextual support for mentoring, effective mentor selection and pairing processes, and mentor preparation, including strategy development. There remains much work to be done, however, in establishing rigorous and sustainable programs and practices in this domain, as well as systematic research in the field (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Orland-Barak, 2014; Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010). While building productive relationships is at the core of teacher education, the role of the school-based mentor, as indicated above, is often ambiguous and high in tension, particularly when trying to find a balance between mentoring and assessing a pre-service teacher (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Hudson & Hudson, 2010; Hudson & Millwater, 2008; Johnston, 2010; Laker, Laker, & Lea, 2008; Sim, 2011). As Feiman-Nemser (2001) emphasised, school-based learning has the potential to foster powerful teaching and to develop the dispositions and skills of continuous improvement but it must be acknowledged that this is situated in practice and in a relationship with an experienced teacher.

We need evidence as to what works in enhancing the professional learning and development of pre-service teachers such that they are enabled to improve the learning outcomes of students in their care—surely a fundamental goal of schooling. The existing evidence base for mentoring is limited by the fact that the research is focused predominantly on mentees' and mentors' beliefs and perceptions about mentoring (Hobson et al., 2009). Thus, to a large extent we are in a position where “what student teachers learn about teaching practice from their cooperating teachers remains an unanswered question” (Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2008, p. 131).

Clearly, then, these are challenging times in terms of responding to the needs of those working in the professional experience domain of ITE. *Project Evidence* was designed to make a contribution in this area. While forthcoming papers will deal with other dimensions of the project, we emphasise in this paper the work done through the project to support the professional learning of the mentor. As noted above, our work in this area enabled us to position the mentor beyond the usual dualism of “supervisor” and “assessor” to incorporate the mentor's own professional learning as an inherent feature of their role. Additionally, the inclusion of mentors as key stakeholders and contributors in *Project Evidence* enabled us to honour the nature of partnership in ITE, as well as to address the concern as expressed by Taylor, Klein and Abrams (2014), that much of the research about mentoring has been conducted “on mentors” rather than “with mentors” (p. 5). The project team worked with mentors to explore the ways in which they construe their practice, which is central to establishing a concept of what it is to mentor in the ITE context (Bryan & Carpenter, 2008). We believe that we have moved beyond the era of equating a “good teacher [with a] good mentor” (Jones, 2009, p. 15), where mentors are afforded little or no preparation or professional learning for working with pre-service teachers, and beyond the “faulty

assumption that pre-service teacher education is the sole responsibility of universities or colleges of education” (Clarke et al., 2012, p. 168).

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