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## External Mentoring for new teachers: mentor learning for a change agenda

Caroline Daly, Emmajane Milton

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper reports on a qualitative study of the learning and development of seventy External Mentors during the first year of their deployment to support early career teachers' professional learning as part of a national initiative aimed at school improvement in Wales.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study adopted a narrative methodology that elicited accounts of External Mentors' learning experiences that were captured as textual data and analysed using an inductive approach to identify: i. the manifest themes that appeared at declarative level, and ii. the latent (sub-textual) themes of External Mentor learning and development.

**Findings** – Four key themes emerged that indicate the complexity of transition to the role of External Mentor in high-stakes contexts. From these, eight theoretically-informed principles were derived which support mentors to embrace uncertainty as essential to their learning and development, and to harness the potential they bring as boundary-crossers to support the development of new teachers.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study investigated the first year of a three-year programme and worked with one form of qualitative data collection. The research results may lack generalizability and a longitudinal study is necessary to further explore the validity of the findings.

**Practical implications** – The eight principles provide a foundation for mentor development programmes that can support ambitious goals for mentoring early career teachers.

**Originality/value** – The study addresses the under-researched area of the learning and development of External Mentors at a national scale.

**Keywords:** communities of practice, Continuing Professional Development, induction programmes, mentoring, mentoring and coaching for secondary contexts in education, mentoring and learning theory, mentoring and education, professional development and mentoring, teacher education.

**Article Type:** Research paper

### Introduction

This paper reports on a qualitative study of the learning and development of seventy external mentors during the first year of their deployment to support teachers' professional learning as part of the Welsh Masters in Educational Practice. The Masters in Educational Practice is a strategic development in Welsh teacher education offered to three cohorts of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) between 2013-2017. It is aimed at providing masters accredited professional learning for teachers in Wales throughout the first three years of their career, forming part of the Welsh Government (WG) '20 point plan' (WG, 2011) to improve educational standards in Wales. It was developed to provide enquiry-based, theoretically-informed and sustained professional learning as an entitlement for new teachers and reflects international consensus within research that improving the quality of teaching itself is the chief factor in improving the quality of pupils' learning and attainment in schools (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Husbands and Pearce, 2012).

Central to the design of the programme is the nation-wide network of external mentors who are experienced practitioners, employed outside of their mentees' schools and funded by the WG. External mentors support and assess NQTs in the Induction year and engage their mentees in reflective dialogue about their developing practice, values and understanding of teaching, aimed at

improving the quality of learning and attainment of pupils. This is sustained for three years. The related long-term goal is that external mentoring builds capacity for school improvement by supporting the development of expertise in early career teachers, enabling them to become pedagogical innovators and agents of change (Hopkins, 2013).

There are inevitable challenges for the professional development of external mentors given these ambitions and the scale of the initiative. The external mentors' core role is to sustain reflective dialogue with new teachers about their practice development, both face-to-face and online. The lack of a structured and coherent support strategy for early career teachers post-induction is well-documented, for example by Hobson (2012) and Kennedy and McKay (2010), and the demands on external mentors in providing support for new teachers sustained over three years are considerable. At the same time, research into mentor development has been almost entirely restricted to school-based mentors: research into the development, needs and experiences of *external* mentors in teacher education is practically non-existent. This study extends understanding therefore in an under-researched context where the introduction of external perspectives is considered key to innovating practice in schools by impacting on new teachers. It proposes eight principles for the design of professional development that can address the needs of external mentors and support them to meet such expectations.

### **Context: the Masters in Educational Practice**

The Masters in Educational Practice was launched in 2012 with 438 Newly Qualified Teachers who elected to participate (55% of those eligible). Its aims reflect Guskey's (2002) goals for professional development: change in classroom practice, change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs and change in pupils' learning outcomes. The programme design reflects core features that have been found to be supportive of professional learning, involving: enquiry (Pollard, 2008), high contextual relevance and collaboration (Stoll *et al.*, 2012). It aimed to develop reflective and evaluative capacities for teachers as a foundation for making critically informed judgements about changes in action. The expectation was that such changes would ultimately be achieved through practising teacher leadership (Frost, 2012) and teacher enquiry. Participants attend taught sessions with university tutors and their external mentors on three days per year and engage with online materials and discussions. Theoretical perspectives and research evidence are introduced with an aim of developing the participants' criticality and understanding of learning and teaching, with a strong emphasis on increasing inclusion by developing curriculum and pedagogical change. The external mentors are crucial to the mentees' development of the critically reflective and agentic capacities which are core to the programme achieving its aims - there is limited individual contact between participants and the university tutors.

External mentors are experienced education practitioners who are employed in Welsh schools, Local Authorities, university education departments, or as inspectors and independent educational consultants (recently retired head teachers and senior school leaders). They work with groups of between 1-15 mentees, allocated across primary and secondary phases from a range of subject disciplines. They have a dual role in the first year, supporting NQTs during statutory Induction to meet the Welsh Practising Teacher Standards and engaging them in challenging dialogue about their teaching in relation to the masters programme requirements to develop critically informed practice. Debate exists around the tensions between 'assessment' and 'support' roles in mentoring NQTs (McIntyre *et al.* 2009). Assessment and support have been argued to make 'uncomfortable bedfellows' (Cullingford, 2006, p. 2), creating uncertainty in the mentoring role. Hobson and Malderez (2013, p. 9) identify these as conflicting roles and as a 'failing' that can promote 'judgementoring' and inhibit the establishment of a 'safe and trusting relationship'. Yusko and Feiman Nemser (2008, p. 2) however argue that 'it is not only possible to combine assistance and

assessment, but it is impossible to separate them and still take new teachers seriously as learners'. The latter perspective offers the closest rationale for the decision of the WG to appoint external mentors throughout all three first years of teaching, but it is recognised that role-conflict is an unresolved issue in the mentoring of NQTs generally. This study does not explore this particular tension but it is acknowledged that this is a contributory factor that may affect mentors' transitions to their new roles, particularly for those still employed in schools and thus also playing 'insider' roles in those contexts.

The external mentors ideally maintain a mentoring relationship with their mentees over the three years of the Masters in Educational Practice programme. In the first year, seventy external mentors were deployed, sixty continued with their mentees into the second year and forty-nine into the final year. Attrition was predominantly due to fifteen (employed) mentors receiving promotions, which anecdotally many attributed to the professional development achieved through external mentoring. Five resignations were related to personal reasons e.g. ill-health or life events and two to the role not meeting external mentors' own (unspecified) expectations.

Mentees are re-matched to alternative external mentors should their original mentor be unable to continue. Twenty-two hours of mentoring in the induction year comprises: six visits to mentees' schools, including observation of teaching and conversations with mentees; moderating online discussion linked to module themes and convening mentees' workshops at taught sessions arranged with university partners. External mentors make further contact by email, phone and text with mentees to provide support on a responsive basis.

As outsiders to their mentees' schools, external mentors have the potential to disrupt. They enable 'risky talk' (Eraut, 2000) among new teachers, which can question orthodoxies and existing practices in many schools – a conflicted role for many external mentors who are or have been senior school leaders, Local Authority advisors, inspectors and experienced classroom teachers. The disruptive dynamics of teacher enquiry has been identified as both necessary and in need of support for those engaged in it. Cook (2015) and Hawkins (2015) highlight the importance of 'disruption' of normative school discourses and practices but stress that alongside that is a need for 'strong communities of practice...to be disruptive without support would run the risk of leaving people without the security upon which to build new ways of thinking and acting' (Cook, 2015, p. 462). As mentors of new teachers in this context, there are significant implications for external mentors' own development. Jones (2006) proposed a main aim of mentoring as being to help new teachers to manage their 'socialisation into the profession'. By carrying out roles as mediator and facilitator, they can act in ways that support what Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualised as 'legitimate peripheral participation' by which newcomers become members of established communities of practice. Jones has focused on challenges in achieving membership of the school community whilst also being assessed, but the concept of participation by newcomers needs to be problematised further. New teachers in policy developments such as the Masters in Educational Practice are viewed as needing support to initiate change and resist orthodoxy, as well as to become socialised and perform against norms set out by the Practising Teacher Standards and their school environments. They need to negotiate this potentially conflicted position by relying on external mentoring that provides opportunities to attune their practice to what is possible within their contexts - and to do so with critical understanding of the communities they are joining.

To support these complex expectations of what can be achieved, external mentors attend six mandatory training days per year throughout the three years. McGee and Lawrence (2009) highlight

limitations in opportunities for those who support teacher development to be reflective practitioners themselves. Knowledge of teacher education practices such as teacher enquiry, research literacy development and critical professional dialogue can be unfamiliar for the most experienced of school-based professionals and 'it is vital that there is effective professional learning for teacher educators, the 'teachers' of teachers' (ibid. p. 155). Research into *external* mentoring in the context of teachers' professional development is underdeveloped (Hobson and McIntyre, 2013; McIntyre and Hobson, 2016) due partly to its relatively recent emergence as a wide-scale strategy. External mentoring is logistically complex to manage on a large scale and is a relatively expensive strategy in the short term, based on funding an experienced practitioner to spend time regularly with mentees, often involving travelling moderate distances to those who are geographically distributed. Until now, it has been targeted at subjects with severe shortages of expertise (for example physics – see Hobson and McIntyre, 2013).

### Literature Review

Norman and Feiman-Nemser (2005, p. 608) proposed the need for 'educative' mentoring which supports new teachers to develop an enquiry approach to the classroom and the development of deep understanding of learning and teaching, so that changes in practice are based on critical thinking rather than immediate solution-focused strategies. Educative mentoring has been highlighted as a 'new mentoring stance' by Langdon and Ward (2015, p. 241), implying a deeply ingrained set of principles and practices for mentoring that are embedded in wider educational purposes. A 'new mentoring stance' suggests that mentors and new teachers engage in collaborative talk and action with the potential to deepen understanding about how pupils learn and in turn develop 'alternative practices' (ibid.) that can address diversity and inclusion in classrooms. Langdon and Ward suggest that educative mentoring promotes the questioning of norms and challenges assumptions about 'what works', arguing that:

...under an educative model, mentor teachers are expected to co-construct professional learning, where the learning is often reciprocal (Langdon, 2014) and that the mentor-mentee relationship is one of collaborative partnership rather than expert novice. (p. 243)

Langdon's (2014) study in New Zealand examined the core features of mentor dialogue that can bring about 'educative mentoring' among school-based mentors but found that only a minority fostered critically engaged reflective dialogue about teaching with their mentees. There is insufficient serious attention to the *educative* aspects of the mentor role, despite awareness of the limitations of mentoring that primarily inducts new teachers into reproducing school norms and practices. There are implications for the potential for external mentors, who are not concerned with reproducing the *status quo* within any one school, to develop educative mentoring.

Such studies encourage revised ambitions for what mentors can do as change agents and how their own beliefs about mentoring can be challenged through exposure to developmental experiences. The challenges involved in changing mentors' beliefs about mentoring have been explored by Lejonberg *et al.* (2015) who highlight the persistence of beliefs 'based on one's own practice' (p. 144) and the need for mentor development programmes that can challenge mentors' existing belief systems. Mentor development however, frequently falls short of achieving this and Jones (2009) claimed that mentors are often under-prepared to fulfil the complexities and demands of the role of teacher educator. Recent policy recommendations in the UK indicate a growing focus on the role of mentors in early teacher development (see Donaldson's (2011) recommendations for mentor development to support induction in Scotland, and DfE (2016) National Standards for school-based Initial Teacher Training mentors). These developments however, have been made with inadequate attention to the complexities of mentor learning as identified by Jones (2009) especially in wide-

scale national contexts. A notable exception has been the 'full release model' (Moir and Bloom, 2003) started in Santa Cruz in the United States, which seconds practising teachers for three years to become external mentors for new teachers in their local districts. By full immersion in mentoring practice and a sustained collaborative mentor development programme, Moir and Bloom identified significant enrichment of mentors' knowledge and understanding of effective pedagogies, leading to increased efficacy or 'professional replenishment' (p. 58) in their own practice on return to the classroom.

External mentoring as a teacher development strategy however has been broadly neglected historically despite long-established concerns about the efficacy of school-based mentoring for new teachers. School-based mentoring has attracted criticism for fostering a reductive concept of mentoring that addresses deficiencies in new teachers (OECD, 2005). Limitations have included: inadequate support for beginning teachers' emotional well-being (Smith and McLay, 2007); encouragement towards low risk activities (Malderez *et al.*, 2007) and mentoring that endorses and replicates norms and practices (Achinstein and Athanases, 2006). Hobson *et al.*'s (2009b) study of new teachers in England found that the overwhelming majority of NQTs (94%) have positive relationships with their school-based mentors, but this may indicate the impact of close working relationships on the uncritical assimilation of new teachers into existing school practices. Hodkinson (2009) identified the importance of exposing teachers to external perspectives. Her identification of 'boundary-crossing' in teachers' professional learning draws on Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice to explore the importance of exposing teachers to external viewpoints which are potentially disruptive of the *status quo* and accepted practices and power relationships within organisations.

The concept of boundary-crossing indicates the processes involved in bringing together practices, people or objects from differing contexts to 'achieve hybrid situations' (Engeström *et al.*, 1995) that can be generative and create learning conditions that result from exposure to new conditions or perspectives. Disruption to routines and re-evaluation of taken-for-granted 'truths' about how things are done can be valuable consequences of boundary-crossing in work and education contexts, and contribute to 'expansive' learning environments. Engeström (2001) uses the term 'activity' to reference practices which include not only what is being 'done', but the human will and intention behind the 'doing' - i.e. with the potential to achieve transformational goals. Expansive learning environments are predicated on the idea of learning as a longitudinal process in which participants of an activity system undertake actions that have learning consequences, to analyse the inner contradictions of their activity, then to design and implement a new model for their activity that significantly expands its object, opening up new possibilities for action and development. Research in work-based learning has highlighted the importance of such 'expansive' learning environments (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003; Evans, 2006) that foster a range of collaborative and dialogic practices, both formal and informal, which support risk-taking and the introduction of critical outsider viewpoints on practice. Burch and Jackson (2012) suggest that in teacher education a 'Third Space' that is different from school or university can enable collaborative and dialogic professional learning approaches to flourish, supporting disruption of existing norms. They argue that 'by crossing a boundary, participants are compelled to reconsider their assumptions and look beyond the known and familiar' (p. 8). In such a Third Space context, considerable boundary-crossing is required to ensure that 'learning experiences are coherent and principled' (p. 9). McIntyre and Hobson (2016) have further applied the concept of the 'Third Space' to external mentoring for beginning teachers, drawing on Guetierrez's (2008) notion of *authentic interactions* in a discursive space. The emphasis on authentic and non-judgemental interactions facilitated by expansive learning environments is

highly relevant to the potential contribution of external mentoring to early career professional learning and development.

Within school environments, (new) teachers can find they are inhibited from achieving authentic critical reflection on practice. They are often reluctant to discuss concerns about their teaching and the practices they are encouraged to adopt, with few opportunities to disclose these in a non-judgemental context. Increased opportunities are needed for frank discussion about these challenges and their development needs. Hobson and McIntyre (2013) propose external mentoring as a crucial 'antidote' to what Ball (2003) conceptualised as 'fabrications', which are damaging 'misrepresentations' of reality with regard to people or organisations, which are intensified by the pressures of performativity and accountability:

Every participant who indicated that they engaged in the construction and maintenance of fabrications as strategic silence stated that they were able to be more open and honest about their perceived limitations with their EM [external mentor] than they were with their school-based mentors and line managers. (Hobson and McIntyre, 2013, p. 355).

NQTs, as newcomers to a school where they are to be assessed against national standards for induction, are vulnerable to 'fabrication' in presenting narratives of their professional progress to school colleagues. The fact that 87% of NQTs on the Masters in Educational Practice programme had temporary teaching contracts in their first year indicates their vulnerability in exposing weaknesses.

Countering survivalist staffroom discourses is a long-established challenge for the development of new teachers. Reductive accounts of professional practice can restrict new teachers in moving beyond a focus on 'survival' and Daly *et al.* (2004) identified the benefits for NQTs of 'critical talk about teaching' (p. 104) and the challenges to achieving this in purely school-based contexts. Post-induction, these survivalist staffroom discourses can be replaced by pressure to manage serial policy initiatives so that the perpetually embattled professional must develop coping strategies to deal with immediate demands. Thus early career teachers move into a new stage of 'reality shock' (Hobson, 2012) and become subsumed into reductive discourses of 'what works'. 'Risky talk' (Eraut, 2000) is needed to critique cultures and practices through articulation with an 'outsider'. The implications for the professional learning and development of external mentors as these 'outsiders' are considerable.

External perspectives then can challenge the dominant discourses of in-school practices, enabling alternative accounts to be provided – for example regarding practice with 'lower ability' pupils, or conceptualising 'More Able and Talented' pupils. Such counter-thinking however makes demands upon those who provide the external support to re-evaluate their own engagement with the issues and with new teachers as they attempt to develop principled practice. Experts who find themselves novices in a new situation often have their confidence shaken and experience re-evaluation of their knowledge and competences (Zeichner, 2005; Murray, 2010). This has been identified as forms of novice/expert tension (Murray, 2010; Skerrett, 2010) experienced by senior practitioners who are in transition between roles. Since external mentors are (by selection) 'experts' and not only in a new role but in one with little precedent in terms of scale or longevity, the potential for novice/expert tension is high.

The conclusion can be drawn that disruption is a key affordance of external perspectives that can be brought to new teachers' development, with a focus on the catalytic potential of being exposed to questions posed by 'outsiders', resulting in questioning taken-for-granted orthodoxies of practice and resistance to uncritical co-option into normalised routines in schools. What is less understood is the features of external mentors' own development to carry out a role in which 'disruption' is core. As key boundary-crossers, more needs to be examined about the considerable challenges that may

be presented for external mentor's professional knowledge and for their dispositions to support NQTs to become critically aware practitioners, with implications for what constitutes appropriate external mentor learning and development.

## **Methodology**

The study identifies the features of external mentors' professional learning and development during the first year of the three year programme when transitional experiences are intense. Data was collected using a narrative methodology (Daly, 2012; Wang and Geale, 2015) during a mentor development day towards the end of year one. By this stage, external mentors had conducted five-six visits to mentees in schools, including four observation sessions, conducted three-four mentoring conversations, conducted two online reflective discussions and led a group of mentees at three face to face 'learning events'. Email and telephone mentor conversations were frequent. Narrative methods are established within practitioner development (Greenhalgh, 2006; Daly 2010), based on the conviction, borrowed from research in the social sciences, that such methods have the flexibility that is necessary to capture and record the complexities of human experiential phenomena. The turn to narrative in the 1990s established a methodology for understanding and developing practice in the professions. For participants, constructing narratives about their experiences is a way to 'organise and interpret experience and communicate it memorably in social contexts. In several ways, narratives make sense and give coherence to our personal and professional lives' (Cortazzi, 2001 p. 1).

Seventy external mentors were asked in fifteen groups of four-five to identify, describe and reflect upon specific developmental experiences in their first year which they wished to share because they had made an impact on their mentoring or their understanding of mentoring. These were rooted in incidents or experiences during training days or mentoring episodes. The trainers who conducted this research established that the mentors themselves were to run self-regulated, open-ended discussions from which the researchers withdrew. It was important that the researchers were not present in the discussions. Emphasis was placed on external mentors feeling able to speak candidly, including being able to criticise any of the developmental experiences designed by the researchers. By asking them to discuss without recording devices and then complete anonymised 'capture sheets', the participants were given secure conditions to share accounts and interpretations of their experiences. The intention was to immediately capture the reflections that had emerged from a sense-making process that was controlled by the mentors themselves. The intention was not to investigate the collaborative or sense-making process itself, but rather to identify the collective outcomes that were produced by using narrative as a catalyst among the participants for reflection, prioritisation and synthesis of experience. External mentors were used to participating in activities aimed at articulating experience, based on the training pedagogy which included critical incident analysis, structured peer-talk and gallery activities aimed at establishing reflective dialogue and peer-trust. On concluding their discussions, the groups were asked to reflect collectively on their responses to three open-ended prompts:

- the positive aspects of their developmental experiences to date
- the challenges and difficulties they had faced in developing as mentors
- what they had learned at that stage.

Following this, each individual then completed a simple capture sheet under these headings. The data analysed in this paper was generated by all three prompts.

The external mentors gave accounts of their experiences within their groups and identified the key issues which emerged without being steered towards topics or themes suggested by the



researchers. Riessman (2008) questions the reliability of memory as a source of data because participants inevitably ‘edit the remembered past to square with our identities in the present’ (p. 8). The external mentors in this study were asked to articulate the ‘remembered past’ and were vulnerable to such partiality. The point of the study however is not to capture accounts of development that can be factually verified. Remembering experience was a *catalyst* for meaning-making processes among the external mentors. It is the refined and synthesised outcomes produced by the external mentors that are of interest. The approach was influenced by Greenhalgh’s (2006) claim that enabling participant narrative within professional learning contexts involves individuals in constructing interpretations, where ‘intra-group discussion about what a particular story *means* fuels the learning cycle’ (p. 40). It was important to avoid idiosyncratic responses. The aim was for the data to be the result of shared reflection and refinement of thinking, and did not seek individual histories of external mentors’ learning and development. The external mentors themselves completed a first level of interpretation by selecting key points from their shared oral accounts, prioritising, omitting and synthesising to ‘capture’ their learning experiences in a distilled form on the sheets. The examples of outcomes that are recorded in Table 1 are thus recorded by individual mentors but are the product of collective reflection and rehearsal of ideas.

## Analysis and findings

In an inductive approach to the data, both researchers undertook a systematic reading of the capture sheets. Analysis followed the key stages in analysing qualitative data identified by Costley *et al.* (2010), by identifying the features of external mentors’ learning and development and then grouping these to reduce to a number of themes so that broader and more abstract or ‘latent’ themes emerged. This was followed by further interpretation based on theoretical analysis of the latent themes. In the first stage of coding the features of external mentor learning and development at a declarative level were identified by intensive reading of the capture sheets. This was undertaken independently by each researcher, who extracted related quotations and grouped them into tentative content themes. A comparison of the initial coding was conducted that resulted in dominant themes being identified and a further independent re-coding of the data was undertaken using these. Further comparison of these results was made, in which the themes were further refined and reduced to ten and all the content data was jointly checked for the most appropriate allocation to the categories. These content categories are presented in Table 1, with indicative examples of quotations from the data. These were discernible at surface level in the data collected, and provide ‘manifest’ themes which are readily identifiable.

INSERT TABLE 1

Table 1. Features of External Mentor learning and development (manifest themes).

In the second stage of analysis the data were interrogated at what Garrison and Anderson (2003) have called ‘subtextual’ level, to identify the latent features within the content categories which appear beneath the surface of the text. Each researcher undertook independent analysis of the content data organised into the ten manifest themes. This required further interpretation of the participants’ declarative responses to explore the patterns within them and develop underlying links to form latent themes which were then compared and refined. This involved grouping and

synthesising the original content categories to identify the four latent themes that characterise the external mentors' learning and development (see Table 2):

1. Professional learning community
2. Reconceptualising professional learning
3. Agentive mutuality
4. Conflicted relations with the knowledge base

INSERT TABLE 2

Table 2. Latent themes in External Mentor learning and development.

**1. Professional learning community: 'all in it together, learning along the way with others'**

A strong sense of professional community can be identified, in which external mentors learn from and with each other through formal and informal dialogue opportunities and critical discourse around shared experiences. Three dominant features characterise the ways the external mentors perceived their development as part of a professional learning community: dialogic dimensions, the significance of diversity and emotional and social engagement in mentor learning.

The dialogic dimensions of mentor learning and development were evident in repeated reference to engaging in multiple forms of professional talk. References to 'dialogue', 'talk', 'discussion opportunities' and 'peer discussion' were the most common items in the content overall. Networking was a dominant item, e.g. 'making connections', 'networking with colleagues - positive feeling' and 'mentor network!'. Several external mentors referred to the national network with colleagues 'from all over Wales and across sectors' (referring to mentors collaborating from all statutory school phases and Special Education), which perhaps indicates this was a rare context in which professionals talked and worked together across traditional boundaries. The value attributed to talk - in 'high level discussions' - is contextualised by references to dialogue which transcends barriers of language, region, phase, subject specialism or previous role seniority.

Diversity is a characteristic that is linked with the dialogic features of the external mentors' learning and development. Significance is attached to sharing practices and 'others' views' and 'collating different people's ideas' within a diverse group of mentors, from a 'wide range of experiences and backgrounds' including a 'variety of colleagues cross-phase', which is 'inclusive of all types of external mentors'. Self-generated expertise as a group was a strong feature, given conditions that capitalised on their differences. The emphasis on diversity needs to be seen within a relatively homogenous group - all external mentors met selection criteria and all had experience in the Welsh education context. That said, they articulated the importance of significant differences - being 'all types' in terms of backgrounds, experiences and skills. The identification of diversity as a major factor in their learning experiences suggests the need for cautious judgements regarding the desirable characteristics of effective mentors. The differences between some external mentors' professional contexts verges on the 'inter-professional' - for example between a teacher, school inspector, Local Authority advisor and university professor. This plurality of perspectives and

potential for rich peer exchange and challenge is not possible to achieve within a school-based mentor model.

Emotional and social engagement is evidenced in the importance attributed to 'developing professional relationships'. Mutual endeavour is a strong feature here - 'all in it together - learning along the way with others', 'making relationships', valuing the 'social side' and 'being part of a team'. Achieving productive relationships takes time and effort however, and is supported by working together towards a shared purpose. McGee and Lawrence (2009, p. 148) stress the importance of 'creating a safe learning environment' in which those involved in teacher education can feel 'secure enough to take risks and share challenges about their practice'. The importance for professional learning of a community built on mutuality, trust and common endeavour is well-established (Bolam *et al.*, 2005; Fresko and Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2014) and the data would suggest this has high applicability to external mentors who are distributed throughout Wales and from a range of contexts.

## **2. Reconceptualising professional learning: 'shifts the focus/emphasis onto...me!'**

External mentors acknowledged the professional learning they experienced as a result of interrupting former routines, for example by having the 'opportunity to STOP (after 19 years in the classroom) and be reflective'. Having been selected for their mentoring experience and in some cases having recently retired from leading schools or occupying senior education roles, this suggests a complex relationship with their own continued professional development: they refer to 'developing increased reflective thinking' and 'encouraging the opportunity to develop deep, critical thought about our own practice'. There is evidence of a 'Third Space' that has been afforded by the disruption to previous roles and routines. Although the concept of the 'The Third Space' has been applied to the learning of mentees/trainees, the data suggest a wider applicability to the learning and development of the 'educators' within these conditions. Many expressed how their emphasis had expanded from a main focus on the learning of their mentees to an increased awareness of their own learning and the relationship between the two, noting that this change 'shifts the focus/emphasis onto...me!' The shift results in deepened self-awareness and critical self-evaluation as a mentor practitioner, indicated through 'increased reflective thinking', in response to 'the opportunity to develop deep, critical thought about our own practice'.

These data suggest the external mentors could experience a depth of reflexivity and reconstruction of professional insights and beliefs at this advanced career stage, with impacts on their professional identities, 'making us think/reflect/change'. Their learning is attributed by the external mentors to the dialogic practices and interactions within the community - they learn from the 'teachers' and the 'mentors'. Being external may expose mentors to dilemmas and challenges due to the fact that they engage beyond the bounds of familiar work contexts. The issues that arise for new teachers resonate with the external mentors themselves. There is frequent reference to the challenge of deepening the reflective capacities of their mentees with awareness of the need to develop mentees' criticality to meet the transformative agenda of the Masters programme. External mentors express concern in some cases about meeting this challenge. They express that they 'need more training on depth of critical reflection - how to get NQTs to demonstrate this' and that they 'need to know [more about how mentees achieve] appropriate depth of responses' and want to increase the 'chance to develop [NQTs'] ways of thinking'. Most external mentors display expert/novice tensions identified by Murray (2010) and Skerrett (2010) related to expectations of the depth of critical discourse they could construct with mentees.

## **3. Agentive mutuality: 'chance to work with innovative practitioners right at the start of their careers'**

'Agentive mutuality' signifies the capacity to bring about change through joint endeavour which is focused on shared aims. It is based on a collective understanding and purpose which is fostered through inter-mentor learning, learning with mentees and mentoring practices with new teachers. The data suggest that the mentors' agentive capacity operates as a collective - brought about with fellow mentors and with mentees. External mentors acknowledged the degree to which they were co-learning with their mentees and 'working with exciting novice teachers', stating that mentoring entailed 'meeting young, enthusiastic teachers who are eager to develop'. There was surprise at the extent of opportunities for mutual learning with many NQTs, for example having 'very exciting class management and pedagogy talks'. This aspect of their own learning challenged existing conceptions of mentoring held by some. There was reference to conducting 'active research *with* NQTs' [our italics] and despite their considerable experience, 'learning about different aspects of teaching and learning'. This was also related to their role in the change agenda, where the mentors convey that, by working with their mentees, they are 'making a difference, helping improve classroom practice'. Dominant features reflect a deepening awareness by the external mentors of how far they were implicated in bringing about change in classrooms. A collegiate dynamic is suggested in the reference to a 'growing sense of momentum'. The extent of new teachers' capacities to innovate had not been fully anticipated, nor was this expected by the external mentors as a professional learning aim for the mentees or themselves.

The external mentors perceived that their knowledge had been challenged and extended through dialogue with their mentees and co-constructing an agenda for change in their classrooms, offering external mentors the 'chance to work with innovative practitioners'. The perception of having new opportunities to co-learn implies a changed relationship with concepts of expertise, knowledge and leadership and growing awareness of the role of external mentor as co-constructor of professional knowledge and practice with new teachers. The potential for mentors to foster a different power relationship from that in traditional induction mentoring appears to have been recognised, which supports Hobson and McIntyre's (2013) claim that external mentoring can be emancipatory and provide an 'antidote' to 'fabrication' for NQTs. The data suggest the presence of 'collaborative partnership' (Langdon and Ward, 2015) in many mentoring relationships, with the possibility this brings for 'educative mentoring'.

#### **4. Conflicted relations with the knowledge base: 'more of an academic focus on the content'**

This fourth theme reflects the strong desire for 'academic support' for external mentors about the substantive knowledge being studied by the mentees for their Masters award. There is a sense that there is 'missing' domain knowledge, where some external mentors feel vulnerable. The majority of external mentors did not have Masters degrees. Mentees engaged with independent study materials to support theoretical perspectives. This is the area of professional learning and development where expert/novice tensions identified by Murray (2010) and Skerrett (2010) were most present. Many of the responses indicated a strong desire to develop confidence 'academically'. Concerns included a perceived lack of theoretical knowledge with requests for 'more theory based training (related) to each module' and 'support in academic learning'. In some cases this extended to suggestions of 'refresher courses' in educational theory and for 'academic input' related to the modules. Some external mentors appeared to feel a responsibility to 'teach' the module content to their mentees or at least to know as much if not more than mentees about the content and literature that supported Masters study. This challenged the external mentor role as facilitator of professional dialogue and reflective thinking about practice rather than as 'tutor' in specific domains of knowledge (e.g. phase-specific development of literacy). Desire for guidance about how to support 'academic' content was strong as was an expectation that the mentor training programme could provide this. Anxiety about not 'owning' the academic/research-informed knowledge that was a focus of the mentees' independent study was a major source of discomfort.

Related to this was some insecurity about getting mentoring conversations right with a request for examples of the 'best kind' of mentoring. This was expressed in a small number of cases as a desire for templates or 'cribs' for mentor conversations, 'a list of generic questions to discuss', or 'guidance for consistency of approach - exactly what do we say/do?' and 'this is how you do it' discussions. Mitchell (2013) proposed a need to develop standards for mentoring that focus on the 'motivational' and 'analytical' aspects of mentor practice rather than procedural issues or 'check-lists for effective sessions' (pp. 397-98). The publication of National Standards (DfE, 2016) for mentoring trainees in England however prioritises mentoring to enable trainees to meet government standards for teaching rather than extending mentoring as a critically informed, analytical practice that can contribute to the formation of deeply reflective teachers. It may be that within dominant discourses around performativity, mentees seek certainty and authoritative forms of knowledge in their mentors which makes it challenging for external mentors to resist fixed notions of target knowledge and 'mastery' concepts of professional development. 'Risky conversations' are thus multi-dimensional and require extensive re-evaluation concerning the external mentors' relationship with a variety of forms of knowledge.

## **Discussion**

The impact of newness and risk-taking on transition to the external mentor role is intense. Novice/expert tensions (Murray, 2010; Skerrett, 2010) are in evidence in the ways in which external mentors articulate their experiences of professional learning and development in the first year. Interaction with mentees is a catalyst for re-evaluating the aims of mentoring and the focus of professional learning (who is learning, what is being learnt and for what purpose?), but it is the relations with their fellow external mentors that emerges as critical to how they make sense of these mentoring interactions and navigate change.

The community dimensions of mentor learning and development emerge as important for sense-making in this context and for external mentors' transition to an explicit change-making role. Langdon and Ward (2015) have argued that educative mentoring is fostered in learning communities because they support conditions for enquiry. They suggest that such communities 'tend to leverage transformational practice as everything is questioned, all assumptions are open to discussion and no knowledge is seen as permanent or fixed' (Langdon and Ward, 2015, p. 242). The external mentor community contains features reflecting Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, in which participants 'negotiate the appropriateness of what they do' (p. 81), and reconceptualise 'doing' as collaborative knowledge-building. The strong emphasis in the data on professional community suggests that the agentic dimension of their learning is essentially social. Their declarative statements that constitute 'Inter-mentor dialogue', 'Learning collaboratively', 'Networking', 'Diversity of mentors' and 'Relationship-building' suggest a predominantly collegial perspective to achieving their goals as mentors. In her conceptualisation of an activist teaching profession, Sachs (2003) acknowledges the dual aspect of agentic professional identity as both individual and collegiate, but privileges the notion of identity as located in a 'fraternity'. This she argues to be essential to realising socially responsible goals for education that need to be at the heart of an activist teaching profession. Agentic mutuality around 'momentum' and 'making a difference' suggests changes in the mentors' perceptions of what they ought to and can achieve.

Making sense of experience as a basis for professional learning makes significant emotional and intellectual demands on participants and the affective dimension of mentoring is evident in the data. 'Making us think/reflect/change' indicates disruption of beliefs at this advanced career stage. Coates

(2010) has identified three core elements in supporting mentors to manage these affective as well as intellectual processes. They are: purposeful reflection on complex mentoring situations to gain clarity for moving forward; obtaining practical and emotional support addressing the need for objectivity when dealing with issues which raise past experiences; and providing ongoing learning and professional development. Coates argues that with the growth in mentoring, there is a need for structured 'supervision' from more experienced mentors to facilitate such arrangements. On a national scale such as the Welsh Masters in Educational Practice, resourcing 'supervising' mentors in addition to the external mentor network was an unrealistic expectation. The external mentors show the capacity however to become a self-supporting learning community, given the conditions to grow strong collaborative and consultative ways of working to achieve 'sense-making' and offer each other practical and emotional support. The external mentors in this study identify the diversity of the community as a resource for their mutual learning, in which there is a 'common sense of purpose', and 'being part of a team'. There are significant implications for the design of training within an educative agenda for mentoring, in which mentors are able to discuss candidly the challenges they encounter, embrace diversity and critically evaluate their motivations, perceptions and long-held values.

The benefits of external mentoring for new teachers have been presented persuasively (McIntyre and Hobson, 2016). This study has suggested however that the learning and development needs of external mentors are highly complex if such a role is to harness their potential as boundary-crossers and if they are to disrupt routinised practices in schools to support ambitious goals for transforming education. This is especially the case if external mentoring is to be given serious consideration on a scale that can meet wider demands within shifting models for teacher education in the UK, enabling mentoring to work across subjects and phases and respond flexibly to increasingly diverse initial teacher training and professional development landscapes. There are implications if external mentoring models are to be replicated within other contexts - which is a feasible proposition in meeting the increasing demand for sustained early career development for new teachers combined with the need to access external sources of support and challenge.

This study has only opened up the process of investigating external mentor learning and development in this context based on one type of data and therefore lacks generalisability. It is acknowledged that verification of the findings and theoretical analysis can be enriched by extending the range of data to be analysed and introducing triangulation. The bounded context lends itself to the formation of a case study approach that can examine the learning and development of external mentors from a longitudinal perspective over the three years of mentoring practice. The findings from the first year can reflect only the start of a process for external mentors and indicate broad areas of possibility and concern for further research. Eight principles emerge for meeting the learning and development needs of external mentors within an educative agenda, and are proposed to provide conceptual underpinnings for further research, including potential studies of Masters in Educational Practice mentors at the end of the three-year cycle. The principles are based on enabling participants to 'mentor the mentors' to meet agentive goals for teacher development:

1. Harness diversity of experience among mentors - a mentor learning community is constituted in difference;
2. Dialogue is the pedagogical basis for mentor learning and development, to enable mentoring to be articulated, understood and interpreted within the community;
3. Inclusive design is essential in order to explicitly attribute equal value and currency to each mentor's experience and perspective in order to reconceptualise 'expertise';
4. Problematised the concept of 'consistency' in mentor-mentee conversations - each mentoring instance is unique with a need to 'mentor in the moment';

5. Promote disruptive exchanges through 'risky talk' to rehearse conversations with new teachers that legitimise criticality and grow confidence;
6. Model resistance to a solution-focused orientation for the external mentor role and explore complexity;
7. Recognise the longitudinal dimensions of mentor learning and development - it takes time to build trust for genuine mutual engagement to reflect critically with others;
8. Critique 'what works', and develop an inquiry-orientation to mentor learning and development that enables mentors to challenge teachers to think critically.

These principles are proposed in order to challenge the conditions and constraints that so frequently inhibit opportunities for new teachers to develop critical practice and resist reductive and survivalist discourses. They are needed to support mentors to embrace uncertainty as essential to their learning and development and to harness the potential they bring as boundary-crossers. This may help to fully realise ambitions suggested by Hobson and McIntyre (2013) of external mentoring as an 'antidote' to limitations of school-based mentoring for new teachers. The effectiveness of external mentoring depends greatly on mentors' conceptualisation of themselves as teacher educators and self-realisation of the disruptive potential afforded by the 'Third Spaces' they inhabit with their mentees and fellow mentors.

To develop effective mentor education programmes built on these principles there needs to be both a commitment to a robust and rigorous recruitment process and mandatory, high quality and structured professional development. This has been recognised in contexts of school-based mentoring (Hobson and Malderez, 2013) and in the Santa Cruz 'full release model' for school teachers (Moir and Bloom, 2003). A significant difference between 'full release' and the external mentoring model in Wales however is the comparative homogeneity of the mentor body in the Santa Cruz model where all mentors are seconded teachers and all are intended to return to the classroom or take up school leadership positions. We argue that there are increased opportunities for boundary-crossing by intentionally designing for diversity in external mentor communities and introducing a wider range of expert education professionals with relevant experience of teacher development and outsider perspectives on the work of schools.

## Conclusion

Becoming an external mentor within a high-stakes context of this type is both professionally invigorating and destabilising. External mentors with extensive prior experience of school-based mentoring did not wholly anticipate the degree of challenge associated with becoming a teacher educator linked to a wider national change agenda. The dominant themes of external mentors' professional learning in the first year suggest that significant reconceptualisation of mentoring occurred around their roles, with external mentors reassessing their contribution as change-makers and boundary-crossers rather than experts in particular subjects or phases of teaching. Mutuality with mentees brought a further dimension to the external mentors' concepts of mentoring as change-making, which was broadly welcomed but was another shift that needed to be understood through extensive dialogue with fellow external mentors. High value was attributed to shared practice development and mutual endeavour within a community and this was founded on diversity as a crucial factor in productive mentor interactions. The Welsh policy environment for the study has provided a bounded context in which to examine the potential of external mentoring at scale and to begin investigating the wider consequences for mentor learning and development. As a recent innovation to support teacher development, external mentoring warrants further exploration of what it is that external mentors ought to 'know' and how their learning needs can be met to make the best use of this resource for future teacher development initiatives.

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