A study of mentors in Wales 'coming to closure'

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Abstract

What is the significance of closure in mentoring relationships? This small-scale study explores mentors' reflections on coming to closure in preparing to end long-term mentoring relationships. It was conducted during the final term of mentoring on a three-year accredited national programme aimed at supporting the learning and development of early career teachers in Wales. A reflexive confessional methodology was used to collect qualitative data from thirty-seven mentors regarding their plans for closure and the rationales for their preparations within a high-stakes mentoring context. A conceptual framework for the study was based on an evolutionarily framework of mentoring. Priorities for action and underpinning principles to bring about effective closure with mentees are identified. Preparing for closure is a frequently under-estimated responsibility of mentoring. We conclude that closure is a mentoring practice characterised by distinct behaviours and actions. These are both formal and informal, some located within a final mentoring 'phase' that is time-limited, while others are transitional, spanning the end of the formal relationship and post-mentoring relations. We suggest the final mentoring phase should be reconceptualised to take account of actions that indicate an on-going investment in professional capital that exceeds the time frame of the mentoring relationship.

Keywords: Mentoring, relationships, closure, evolutionary framework

Introduction

There is limited research into the perceptions, experiences and actions of mentors at the point of ending intensive and long-term mentoring relationships and into how mentors can prepare to re-orientate and realign themselves in ways that can support the long-term influence of their mentoring. The past fifteen years have seen a significant growth in policy in the UK and internationally (e.g. the publication of the National Mentoring Standards, DfE 2016; the Guidelines for mentoring newly qualified teachers (NQTs), Welsh Government 2011. Induction for newly qualified teachers in Wales. the Donaldson 2015, Langdon et al. 2014) aimed at harnessing the potential of experienced practitioners to support the learning and development of new teachers – both trainees and early career professionals – by mentoring. Within high stakes contexts for the mentees and for education systems, increasing responsibility has been placed on mentors to contribute to improved teaching practices in schools and the retention of teachers. Whilst there is an established body of research into mentoring which can support these developments, this has focused on: the benefits of mentoring for new teachers (Wang et al. 2008, Ingersoll and Strong 2011); the development of mentoring practice (Langdon et al. 2012, Daly and Milton 2017); the nature of the mentor relationship and identity work which takes place as part of mentor development (Langdon et al. 2012, 2014). Singularly lacking are studies which can inform about the final stages of mentor relationships that have demanded considerable professional and personal commitment over time. Zachary (1999) has argued that the final stage of a mentoring relationship presents the greatest opportunity for 'growth and reflection' (p. 1), yet little research exists into how mentors understand closure and can prepare for it to help maintain the impact of mentoring after the end of the relationship. This small-scale study contributes to this under-researched area by exploring the complex issues involved in ending long-term mentoring relationships within a high-stakes policy environment where effective closure plays an important role in securing enduring benefits for mentees as part of achieving system-wide educational improvement.

Context – external mentoring in the masters in educational practice

The Masters in Educational Practice (MEP) commenced in 2013 as a part-time accredited programme aimed at supporting the learning and development of three cohorts of new teachers throughout their first three years in post. The majority of the final cohort concluded the programme in 2017, with a small number continuing to study until 2020. The MEP formed part of a Welsh Government (WG) suite of initiatives to meet the objective of improving educational outcomes for pupils in Wales (Andrews 2011). All NQTs taking the MEP (some 1355) received support during their induction year from an 'External Mentor' in addition to their School-Based mentor. External mentors, who were experienced education practitioners appointed by WG, continued to work for the duration of the programme with those mentees who opted to study for the MEP, to support their professional learning and development. This study investigates the external mentors' preparation for the conclusion of their long-term mentoring relationships.

The MEP was designed as a blended programme offering face to face and on-line support to early career teachers from their External Mentors, both in their schools and in learning groups at events held three-four times per year. Working collaboratively with the mentees, the mentors provided learning opportunities to help mentees identify professional needs and engage in research-informed and inquiry-oriented professional learning to develop their practice. Mentors were core to the learning aims of the programme, deliberately positioned as 'external' in order to counter assimilationist and survivalist discourses evident within some school-based mentoring practices (Achinstein and Athanases 2006, Hobson and McIntyre 2013). Their externality was designed to challenge a consensual approach to 'good enough' practice within established school routines and to encourage independent and questioning approaches in new teachers. The demands on mentors to establish trust, critical thinking and a secure environment for 'risky talk' (Eraut 2000) as a foundation for new teachers undertaking teacher inquiry, often led to deep professional bonds. In a context where in 2013 over 80% of Welsh NQTs engaged in the MEP were on temporary contracts, the mentors frequently provided the only stable relationship for early career teachers who can move schools multiple times over the course of the programme (Hadfield et al. 2017).

The ways in which this relationship is concluded became a focus with the maturation of the programme and the completion of three-year mentoring cycles. This study focuses on data related to mentors' expectations of closure, and explores their perceptions, concerns and priorities in the context of a 'phase' model of mentoring. This is to understand how mentors disengage from intense and demanding relationships in ways that optimise benefits for early career teachers and which extend the influence of mentoring to fulfil ambitious goals for their deployment.

Conceptualising closure in mentoring relationships

Mentoring is well-established within policy initiatives that aim to support the professional learning and development of early career teachers, nationally and internationally (Wang et al. 2008, Hobson et al. 2009, Ingersoll and Strong 2011, Langdon et al. 2012, 2014, 2016). Much theoretical work relating to mentoring has been undertaken since the late 1970s and has focused on defining the value and nature of the mentoring relationship (Kochan and Trimble 2000, Barker 2006, Kram, Chao 1997).

It is recognised that mentoring is a highly complex professional practice that impacts socially and psychologically on the mentor as well as the mentee. Despite the extensive literature that has developed around mentoring relationships, much of this has focused on establishing and maintaining the relationship (Smith and Ingersoll 2004, Ingersoll and Strong 2011) while there is relatively limited research that has been dedicated to closure and mentors' perceptions of their role in this important phase. This study has therefore drawn on previous research in which the practice of closure is situated within wider conceptualisations of 'phases' in the work of mentors. In doing so, it provides a rare synoptic overview of literature in which closure is considered in depth, suggesting that it needs to be more fully understood in order to maximise the potentials of mentoring relationships and to provide learning and development for mentors to prepare for this important aspect of their practice.

The study draws on 'phases' to conceptualise mentoring relationships which have variable relationships with time, forms of engagement and purpose between mentor and mentee. We draw on Zachary's (2000) conceptual framework that proposes that a mentoring relationship progresses through four predictable phases: preparing, negotiating, enabling and coming to closure. Such phases have been seen as sequential and developmental. They are relatively independent of time-based and psychological milestones, in contrast with models proposed by Missirian (1982) and Kram (1983). Instead, Zachary's framework is focussed on the importance of behaviours or actions required to move thorough each stage. This is appropriate to this study of MEP External Mentors because it stresses an interest in the evolutionary features of actions that are taken as the mentee is supported from being newly qualified to becoming an established teacher and Master's graduate.

Zachary's (2000) case study 'Tuesdays with Morrie'. Albom re-engaged with his professor Morrie Swartz sixteen years after graduating and they agreed that they had a mutual interest in re-kindling their previous relationship, the preparing phase. They decided to meet every Tuesday as Morrie was terminally ill, the negotiating phase. For fourteen Tuesdays Morrie shared his wisdom with Albom, the enabling phase, but throughout this the time they were preparing for closure, when Morrie would die and the mentoring would come to closure. The relationship can be argued to feature the four phases defined by Zachary, and illustrates Covey's (2004) advice 'to begin with the end in mind' when commencing a mentoring relationship. The implication is that the development of the relationship is informed by the inevitability of it ending. Although it may seem premature to consider how to conclude the mentoring relationship just as it starts, Covey argues 'To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding … to know where you are going … so that the steps you take are always in the right direction' (2004 Covey, p. 98). The requirement that it ends is necessary and instrumental to achieving the goals of mentoring so that the mentor withdraws and the mentee is self-sustaining (Zachary 2000). In contrast with Zachary's essentially evolutionary model around behaviours, others have proposed that changes in the emotional and psychological dimensions of mentoring relationships constitute distinct phases. Research by Missirian (1982) and Phillips (1977 Phillips, L., 1977) concerning female managers proposes that changes in emotional relations between mentor and mentee partly constitute developmental phases, moving from mutual admiration, through to development, disillusionment and parting; to end with transformation (Phillips 1977). Kram (1983) considered the developmental aspects of the mentor relationship to be comprised of time frames and phases within which psychological and organisational factors present at any one time. Developmental relationships may vary in length, but generally proceed via four predictable and overlapping phases involving changes in the socio-psychological dynamics between mentor and mentee:

•   The initiation phase: the relationship begins, commitment grows, and support and guidance is provided.

•   The cultivation phase: career and psychological functions expand; frequent interactions occur and emotional bonds are strengthened.

•   The separation phase: structural/organisational and psychological changes significantly alter the relationship.

•   The redefinition phase: a new relationship replaces the original; the mentee desires autonomy and independence.

The 'redefinition' phase, signals a newly evolved form of relationship in which separation is crucial as a prelude to further, more collegial relations, because '… the separation phase is critical to development' (Kram 1983, p. 620). The end of this phase is marked when both recognise that the relationship is no longer desirable in its current form (Kram 1983). A phase model, based on the developing psychological dimensions of mentoring, has broad support from Barker (2006 Barker, E.R., 2006) and Chao (1997) but Clutterbuck's (2005) field research offers a different conceptualisation of how mentoring relationships evolve. Clutterbuck indicates the complexity of closure by introducing a fifth phase, within a model that focuses on behaviours: rapport-building; direction-setting; progress-making; winding down, and moving on. As with Zachary's model, participants actively construct these mentoring phases through actions and behaviours. Two discrete, but connected components of closure are proposed. Firstly

winding down occurs when the desired outcomes have been attained, the mentor has reviewed the significance of the relationship and has considered how it may end. These actions cumulatively assist planning for a successful, effective ending (Clutterbuck and Megginson 2001). In the final phase moving on, a less committed, more informal relationship emerges in which '… complex skills of redefinition' (Clutterbuck 2005, p. 4) are required to foster the new '… professional friendship' (Clutterbuck 2005, p. 4) to afford the mentee independence and collegiality (Clutterbuck and Lane 2005).

For Kochan and Trimble (2000) reflection and an appreciation of the past characterise the final phase as participants accept and nurture or discontinue the relationship, make transitions, adapt and re-orientate and realign the future (Fox et al. 1992). All such actions are components for satisfactory closure, involving evaluating, acknowledging and celebrating the achievement of specific goals and learning outcomes. Routinely reviewing learning goals keeps the relationship focussed, allowing participants to assess progress which signifies that the time for closure is approaching. Crucially, the greater the degree of mentee dependency on the relationship, the more problematic it can be to achieve autonomous self-sufficiency that underlies a continuing professional relationship (Clutterbuck 1998). To ensure there is no loss of momentum and that the agency acquired by the mentee is channelled into future development, Zachary (1999) concludes that despite its frequent brevity, preparation for this final phase presents the greatest opportunity for 'growth and reflection' (p. 1) for both mentor and mentee.

'Coming to closure' then suggests a process, a course of action. Effective closure, which is synonymous with learning and development, should 'catapult' (Zachary 1999, p. 3) the mentee forward, whereas the absence of closure or poor closure can inhibit growth. Whilst acknowledging that an individual's need for closure varies, it is still 'essential for growth' (Zachary, p. 1). When the mentoring relationship disintegrates or fizzles out, Zachary (2000 Zachary) contends that there is a missed opportunity for both to review and reflect. In a similar vein, Junker (1960) and Letkemann (1973) discusses common ways of leaving the field while Star (2014), in line with Clutterbuck (2005 Clutterbuck), concludes that there is a place for 'wind-down' (p. 133), where the amount of contact time and communication gradually decreases rather than arriving at a definite end point. Focusing more on completing the relationship rather than ending it, Star concludes that whilst the active, formal, part may end at a determined moment in time, the informal part ends whenever the both participants agree. Furthermore, Star argues it is more relevant to conceptualise the mentoring relationship in terms of longevity of influence rather than length of active mentoring, 'We are in active relationship with our mentors over a distinct period of time and yet their influence continues beyond that' (2014 Star, p. 131).

The celebration of achievement is a core component of longevity of influence. Zachary (2000, p. 155) advises that the mentee should engage with planning for closure to deepen the sense of contribution and partnership working which has permeated the relationship. Moreover, encouraging the mentee to relate experiences and challenges within their own setting can in turn serve to influence others at an institutional level, thus allowing the mentee's agency to become maximised. Her advice is clear; revisit past achievements, keep the focus on learning and allow the mentee to lead the discussion and articulate their personal vision before supporting them to action it. By talking through future options, Zachary (2000, p. 155) argues that the mentee will become more self-aware and when recounting their experiences mentees are presented with opportunities to become reflective (Schön 1983), self-directed and self-reliant learners.

The strong implication is that coming to closure should be conceptualised as a course of action, or a deliberative practice, rather than a time-specified phase. Perceptions of closure as time-specified frequently result in the absence of adequate preparation (Zachary 1999). This is despite claims that, for both mentors and mentees, appropriate closure '… enables us to slow down, rest, and observe our journey and the process of self-knowledge that is so important along the way' (Huang and Lynch, p. 57). The degree of complexity involved in such a self-knowing process requires conscious engagement and commitment to the importance of the long-term influence of mentoring that supersedes the formal completion of learning goals (Star 2014). Kochan and Trimble (2000) conclude that during this phase a relationship will need to adapt and re-orientate, transition or discontinue – all of which involve both mentors and mentees in what Fox et al. (1992) characterise as a re-alignment for the future.

Contrasting theoretical perspectives on coming to closure therefore place varying emphasis on psychological, time-framed and action-oriented features, located within phase models of mentoring relationships. Transitions to a subsequent phase are characterised by views on what constitutes the 'influence' of mentoring. Influence might include a concern with fulfilling time-specified learning goals of the mentee, consequences for the mentee's future agency and self-reliance and for the mentor's sense of fulfilment or efficacy. A common objective of closure is to facilitate a deeply reflective process of 'self-knowing' for the mentee, so that there is a future trajectory for their professional knowledge and practice. This is crucial for the fulfilment of ambitious national agendas for mentoring as part of educational improvement. An evolutionary focus enables closure to be conceptualised as a practice that is not time-bound and that brings benefits to the mentor as well as the mentee. The goal is for the enhanced self-knowing processes of both mentees and mentors to be sustained post-closure, by which the 'influence' of mentoring is optimised and not contained within formal roles, relationships and time periods.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions and reflections of thirty-seven mentors on preparing for the conclusion of their long-term mentoring relationships within the MEP; it took a reflexive confessional stance. The research design investigated the thinking, concerns and expectations of the participants, using their own words and frames of reference to inform analysis of how 'closure' is anticipated by mentors, their projected practices and what it means to come to closure towards the end of a long-term high-stakes relationship.

The reflexive confessional genre is considered a continuing dialogue of practice (Hertz 1997) while being simultaneously '… in the moment' (Coffey 1999, p. 132). While Coffey argues this '… is usually a wholly descriptive, rather than analytical exercise' (1999, p. 123), it is also argued that it supports participants to generate a personal narrative by recording thoughts and emotions which allow 'self' and an individual's reflections to infuse the account (Cunningham-Burley, p. 98). It provides insight and clarity regarding lived experiences, thereby eliciting a more realistic account and providing those previously silenced a voice (Atkinson 1987, p. 118). Such claims increase the authenticity of the confessional, where subjective accounts contain descriptions of personal (Delamont 1987) and highly reflective experiences (Sparkes 1996). When working with this methodology Hammersley (1983) challenges the researcher to become more reflexive, as some may interpret these accounts to be 'navel gazing' (Okley and Callaway 1992, p. xii) or 'vain' (Llobera 1987, p. 118) as there are risks of generating an idealised view on the part of participants or in the analysis. It is important to confront this with candour to prevent the process from becoming light, trivial or self-inflating (Frith 1965 cited Okley and Callaway 1992, p. 5) for both the mentors and the researchers. The reflexive confessional stance towards data collection heightened the expectations of mentors' critical self-awareness and their understanding of the complexity of preparing for closure.

It was important that mentors felt free to respond to prompts offered as part of the research process, frankly and without consequence. Their authentic perspective was crucial to understanding their thinking and the courses of action that would constitute closure during the last twenty-five weeks of a three year mentoring relationship that had been aimed at challenging and supporting new teachers within a high-stakes programme of professional development. Anonymity was guaranteed. Data were collected during the final two days of mentor training after three years of practice, regarding thoughts and actions in preparing to end their frequently intense relationships with mentees, who had encountered a wide range of challenges in progressing towards a practice-based Master's degree as an early career teacher.

Three weeks prior to the data collection mentors received a preparatory task asking them to consider how they would end their mentoring relationships. This was accompanied by a short briefing paper outlining the need to plan for closure. The purpose was to stimulate reflection on their mentoring as the final weeks drew near and to elicit considered responses based on time to think. On two mentor training days, responses were then gathered from thirty-seven mentors.

An initial collaborative 'Think, Pair, Share' activity (Pimm 1987) was conducted with the mentors, to deepen thinking and to explore and confront assumptions related to ending their mentoring relationships. This structured collaborative talk was followed by individual reflection and commitment to actions that was captured by the mentors on a simple proforma, with two prompts to guide responses, 'Steps I'll take' in ending the mentoring relationship and 'Why I'll take them'. It was designed to elicit authentic, open-ended, personal responses to which the mentors had devoted time and which were also articulated 'in the moment' following discussion with their peers about the imminent closure phase.

There was wide variation in the amount of response captured, ranging from single words to extended paragraphs. Responses from mentors who contributed through the medium of Welsh were translated into English and each mentor response was allocated a number (1–37) to anonymise them. The mean number of mentees per mentor was four, with a range of one to twelve mentees per mentor. The majority of mentors were considering ending multiple mentoring relationships when responding.

Analysis

An inductive approach to analysis was adopted, based on initial shared reading and discussion of the textual content of the completed proformas by two researchers. This was followed by sustained re-reading and identification of themes based on open coding using a grounded theory approach and final theorising to extract significant features that indicate how the mentors understand and prepare for closure. The responses were read to gain an initial impression of these mentors' intentions and their reasoning. This first act of interpretation was carried out by discussing the responses between an English language and Welsh language speaker, which allowed for clarification of any meanings or nuances presented by terms used. This required close attention to the responses in both languages to ensure there was a shared understanding and to facilitate careful examination of what was significant in each response. During this conversation common concepts and dominant actions were identified in the mentors' responses, for example, 'communicate' and 'celebrate' and 'communicate success to the mentee'. This was noted as a running 'memo'.

The responses were then coded as: English/Welsh, steps the mentors would take and the reasons why. The capture sheets were re-read twelve to fifteen times at daily intervals to identify a series of themes using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The literature review was conducted after the data analysis was completed and did not inform the themes derived from the data.

Initially, a series of three broad themes were derived regarding mentors' intended actions: intentions to celebrate, communicate and contemplate. These emerging themes were returned to repeatedly until saturation was reached. As the inductive analysis proceeded, these initial codes were extended and refined from which two overarching categories emerged: 'Priorities for action' and 'Principles of closure'. The priorities for action were manifest in the data: celebrate, evaluate past experience, communicate within a context, reflect forward and adopt a pragmatic approach to closure. Principles of closure were derived from the data through the interpretative process and indicate the underpinning concepts and values that affect action. The principles were identified as reciprocity, recognition and reconceptualising the relationship.

Priorities for action

A time-phase conceptualisation of coming to closure is readily identifiable in the data. When considering their priorities for action (Table 1), mentors wrote about a moment in time when the act of celebrating would mark a transition and changed state for mentees as they graduate and were no longer to be mentored, with one mentor considering that this signalled 'a rite of passage' (11). Such occasions were linked to anticipated actions such as '… send a letter to [the mentee's] Head' (12), which served to mark the end of the more formal, contractual relationship, whereas 'celebrate with bottle of champers' (12) signified the possibility of a less formal act to mark a

transition in the relationship. Evaluating past experience was a priority and included plans for an informal debrief, additionally expressing an intent to plan for communication regarding closure, indicating who they would communicate with and suggesting that mentees should maintain contact with each other 'via email, text, Facebook and twitter' (19), by 'developing an alumni' (18).

Table 1. Priorities for action. Indicative examples of responses.

Priorities for action	Indicative examples of responses, anonymised by mentor number
Celebrate	'…on completing the journey' (2) '…effectively a rite of passage, as I have always done with my learners in past' (11) 'Mentoring like parenting. Reasons we parent is to nurture offspring for adult life. In mentoring, we mentor 'til they're ready to stand on their own' (18)
Evaluate past experience	'…to help me suss out their own view of the MEP' (27) '…to learn what the mentee had valued' (17) '…evaluate the mentor's role from the mentee perspective' (27)
Communicate within a context	'…ensure Head and School Based Mentor have been thanked and informed of completion…end the relationship with school managers on a positive note' (13) [develop an alumni as] 'professional contacts are so important to continuous professional development' (19)
Reflect forward	'…they may need a sounding board - to work out what they want to do' (22) '…allow them to reflect on their own learning and the impact on other professionals in school and schools' (34) '…encourage them to see the MEP as a progressive step in their professional journey' (27) '…reflect on the responsibility they have to their colleagues, pupils, community to use their learning - for the common good' (26)
Adopt a pragmatic approach	'…by discussing the fact that my role is coming to an end, so that the final meeting doesn't leave things open-ended' (4) '…things always come to an end and new opportunities start, the circle of life' (10) [reference to] 'Data Protection Act'…'Delete any digital data /information' (1)

Table I. Priorities for action. Indicative examples of responses.

The intention to reflect forward around a moment of closure in time was considered important, by allowing mentees to '… reflect on the responsibility they have to their colleagues, pupils, community to use their learning – for the common good' (26). The wider purposes of the mentoring relationship to impact on educational improvement in the national context are reinforced here. Reflecting forward is a key action identified by mentors; it is indicated frequently in relation to transitions and future options which would enable mentees to become more informed about their newly established goals. One mentor perceived her role as '… a sounding board – to work out what they [mentees] want to do' (22) and whilst acknowledging her active role in this process she sought '… to encourage them [mentees] to see the MEP as a progressive step in their professional journey' (27). This was endorsed by another mentor who considered persuading her mentee 'to do a presentation of benefits of CPD [Continuing Professional Development] of MEP course' (13). Mentors suggest a need to stop at a moment in time to extract what has been achieved by the mentee. The data reflect to a great extent '… the result of investing energy to complete a worthwhile project and then being able to stand back and admire its successful outcome' (Hattie and Yates 2014, p. 308). According to Hattie and Yates, the opportunity should present itself here for both participants to evaluate the past by rekindling memories of the shared distance travelled. This was exemplified by one mentor who planned to 'Reflect on the journey, evaluate with the mentees' (20) and to 'recognise what they have achieved and what they have learned' (37).

Adopting a contrastingly pragmatic stance towards ending the relationship was important for some mentors, the most striking example of which referred to fulfilling the 'Data Protection Act' and signifying the importance of e-safety protocols. Barker's (2006) argument for a pragmatic approach when ending mentoring is reflected in this data, as prioritised by one mentor who will seek to 'clarify the mentoring role … to ensure they understand the expectations now that process is finished' (33); thereby, clearly communicating (Gibb 2003), and openly acknowledging what will happen (Burke et al. 1990).

Principles of closure

When considering why mentors would take such steps, the themes of reciprocity, recognition and reconceptualising the relationship were identified as underpinning concepts that affected choices about action (Table 2). Comments relating to reciprocity were emphasised where mentors wanted mentees to become involved in ending the relationship. They also reflected a concern for equity in providing mentoring for the following cohort, which might be compromised by unfinished relationships with previous mentees. The ending of the relationship signalled in many ways a 'rite of passage' for the mentors as well as the mentees, some indicating that it was the end of a transformational period of professional experience and they wished to continue their own learning – 'move on to the next challenge'. A sense of mutual fulfilment is communicated with the possibility of a future as 'friends, colleagues or acquaintances'. Further mutuality underpins the theme of recognition, with an interest in the achievements of mentees as members of the teaching profession. Mentors particularly emphasised the hard work undertaken by the mentee, invoking the wider professional context by writing that it was important to 'give deserved praise to a profession which appears only to be criticised' (32). Reconceptualisation of the relationship involves many mentors stating they would re-form or re-define their roles – one wrote that he would help his mentee by giving the option of continuing the relationship 'if they want it' (31). Several, though not all, mentors ultimately show strong interest in prompting the development of a different relationship as 'friends, colleagues or acquaintances' (14). In helping them to 'break the relationship', these mentors demonstrate understanding that '… the separation phase is critical to development' (Kram 1983, p. 620), when mentor and mentee both recognise the relationship is no longer desirable in its current form.

Principles of closure	Indicative examples of responses, anonymised by mentor number

Reciprocity	'…move on to next challenge – as I have found the mentoring experience to be a joy and would like to put skills learned to the final cohort' (21)
	'For my own professional dev't [sic] as a Mentor: improve my skills/practice' (27)
	'Ask my mentees how they feel and how they would like to end the mentoring relationship' (27)
Recognition	'…give deserved praise to a profession which appears only to be criticised' (32)
	'…how good they [mentees] are as a professional' (36)
Reconceptualise the relationship	'…moving from mentor-mentee relationship to friends, colleagues or acquaintances if preferred' (14)
	'…give additional support in organising them to achieve and break the relationship' (33)
	'…letting them know I am available should they need advice in the future' (21)

Table II. Principles of closure. Indicative examples of responses.

Discussion

Despite Zachary's (1999, p. 1) contention that 'coming to closure' is crucial for moving forward there was little evidence that mentors had previously considered how they would undertake this. Kram (1983) suggests that a known end date would normally indicate when a relationship should end. This, as argued by Zachary (2000), does not however trigger an automatic engagement with a productive process of closure – there was no evidence that mentors had already identified with 'closure' or self-reported themselves as being at this stage (Bouquillon et al. 2005, p. 254). Although the end date of the relationship had been determined from the start, critical deliberation was necessary to increase the possibilities of effective closure and maximise the opportunity for long-term influence of mentoring. The analysis has indicated that when coming to closure becomes a sustained focus of mentor reflection, there is interplay between consideration of time-phase-related actions and of the evolutionary features that persist beyond a specific end point. For nearly all the mentors, a priority was to seek to establish clear boundaries between their current mentoring role and a post-mentoring state which may perpetuate a relationship on different terms. Mentors varied however in their emphases on demarcating the end point of the mentoring relationship as a final 'time phase'.

Concluding actions, both formal and informal, are proposed by some as indicators that demarcate the final phase and formal closure of mentoring (open champagne; write to the head teacher; reflect on achievements; attend mentees' graduation). They are planned to both conclude mentor–mentee relations and also signal closure to other stakeholders who share an investment in what has been achieved. They have a clear function linked to temporal events that bring about closure within a time-phase conception of mentoring. Other planned actions however can be conceptualised as transitional acts that span the time before and after formal closure and indicate the expectation of changed relations and optimism concerning an alternative future (establish goals; propose CPD inputs; become friends). Evolutionary transitions out of the mentoring relationship are characterised by a more natural, informal end determined by the participants (Star 2014), typified in suggestions such as 'they are welcome to keep in touch, if they ever need advice' (5). The mentors appear to have anticipated what Clutterbuck (2005 Clutterbuck) identifies as

moving on but it is less clear that a penultimate stage could be described as winding down. The planned behaviours often include a generative dimension, aimed at drawing attention to the mentees' expertise and anticipating further actions and impacts. Realignment for the future (Fox et al. 1992) is complex and more so in sustained or long-term mentoring relationships.

For most mentors, closure can be discerned as 'evolutionary' – a phase with permeable time boundaries and constituted by sets of actions and behaviours that are provisional and conditional. Their responses suggest that, in long-term mentoring relationships in which both parties have shared mutual investment in high-stakes goals over time, it is not sufficient to conceive of a final time-related 'redefinition' phase (Kram 1983) or the achievement of 'long term status' (Twale and Kochlan 1999, Funk and Kochlan 1999). 'Redefinition' or 'long term status' anticipate future stability. They imply that both parties move on to play revised roles without disrupting the current organisation of an education system in which each participant finds their new 'place'. That anticipated stability is not indicated by the data in all cases. Mentors intended that as the bounds of formal mentoring dissolve they would be replaced and reconstituted by a new set of relations with former mentees, with most noting that these relations would be led by the mentees themselves, 'you've established a relationship of trust and support and that continues if they want it' (31). The uncertain nature of such future relations is reflected in the conditional awareness of the mentor's responses, 'offer support for the future if needed …' (12). Guidance on establishing post-mentoring boundaries was provided as part of mandatory mentor training and the data suggest awareness of the need for mentees to become self-sustaining. It is clear however that mentors and mentees own their relationships and that after three years the bonds are complex: for many the negotiation of boundaries will undergo several stages of post-mentoring interaction and future relations cannot be predicted at the point of formal closure.

When attempting to understand complex social interactions the limitations of a conceptual framework can become evident and even hinder understanding of behaviours to inform future practice (Hughes et al. 1985). Zachary's (2000) framework locates each phase within a linear developmental pathway that can appear somewhat static in the light of the complexities of anticipated closure which characterised these mentoring relationships. In this case, a linear model, even one which is evolutionary, struggles to encapsulate the impact that mutual endeavour over an extended period of time has had on 'coming to closure'. Transitional behaviours are not solely concerned with a post-mentoring state of relations between two individuals. For many mentors in this context, planned transitional acts assume on-going investment in the professional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012) that has been at the heart of their relationship. The data suggest that there are varying degrees of on-going investment in such professional capital for these mentors, with differing desires to maintain mutuality and reciprocal sources of support and recognition. Hattie and Yates (2014) contend that when someone takes an active role in the production of a positive outcome, they value the outcome more positively in light of the struggle and difficulty of the task (Gendolla and Richter 2010). Participating in the 'struggle' and the 'difficulty' of the process is part of valuing what has been achieved and several mentors stressed their own fulfilment as part of reflecting on what had been accomplished 'I have found the mentoring experience to be a joy'. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that professional capital can be developed by considering how a mentee's learning can be made more evident. They counsel that achieved goals must be disseminated and 'reinvested by teachers themselves' (p. xvi), as 'collective acts of investment … and a coherent set of actions' (p. xviii). This is significant within the Welsh context where external mentoring was a core strategy to develop capacity in schools by supporting ambitious expectations of new teachers. One mentor suggests his action for closure will be 'to review [mentee] progress and learning and impact on pupils and themselves' (34) and another will emphasise that the mentees should 'reflect on the responsibility they have to their colleagues'. Such intentions reflect the final view of Zachary (2000), that mentees should be encouraged to articulate their personal vision and seek mentor support to do this as part of closure. One mentor intended to discuss with their mentee 'what happened professionally/academically – for yourself/ for the school/ and the wider academic community' (30). Zachary's argument is that agreed learning goals remain the focal point of final mentoring, urging mentors to advocate what the mentee has learnt, so that mentee agency is maximised.

Investment with mentees in mutual professional capital is an important goal of high-stakes, long-term mentoring relationships. Such longitudinal initiatives on a national scale are relatively rare, although proposals for career-long

mentoring to develop and retain teachers is included in current policy considerations in England (DfE 2017). Such wider contexts that link mentoring to ambitious goals for education systems may help to disrupt understanding of 'coming to closure' as a practice that is enacted between two individuals. The complexity of closure within multiple and connected relationships may signal participation in wider practices, as suggested by Sachs (2003) in her call for teachers to engage collaboratively in an 'activist teaching profession' as part of a 'teaching fraternity' (p. 135). Coming to closure here signifies a shared state of transformation affecting mentor and mentee, focused towards 'socially responsible goals' (Sachs 2003, p. 135). These goals bring collective responsibility for change, in which a shared sense of purpose endures within a collective commitment to achieving that. In this wider sense, 'closure' is perhaps not attainable or desirable, and this may have a bearing on understanding the uncertainty surrounding closure for those who are core to the initiative. Evolutionary conceptions of closure come closest to articulating the complexity of the altered state of relations in such contexts. Deeper understanding is needed of how mentors themselves are affected in on-going ways by the investment that has been made. The professional development of mentors to plan for closure is quite likely to be an afterthought, based on extant literature in this area. If long-term mentoring is to play a part in future policy initiatives to develop teachers' practice, serious consideration needs to be given to supporting all stages of the relationship and particularly to ensuring that closure can maximise the benefits beyond the duration of formal mentoring.

Conclusion

This study in the context of mentoring on the MEP in Wales has indicated the relevance of Zachary's evolutionary conceptualisation of mentoring in relation to the final phase of 'coming to closure'. It endorses in particular Zachary's (1999, p. 1) proposals for how effective mentoring should end, so that good closure is synonymous with good learning and '… critical to development' (Kram 1983, p. 620). Thirty-seven mentors across Wales planned for closure involving behaviours they deemed appropriate to the context and to the achievement of professionally and personally fulfilling goals. These planned behaviours and actions constitute varying expectations of 'conclusion' on the part of mentors regarding relations with mentees. Although all mentors expected to clearly signal the end of formal mentoring and the transition of mentees to being self-sustaining, there was variation in the desire and expectation that new relations would persist within a context of shared commitment to wider professional goals. For many, the anticipation of new relations, whether '… primarily a friendship' (Kram, p. 620) or 'peer like' (Chao 1997, p. 16) was viewed as a way to optimise the influence of mentoring.

The study focused on mentors' perspectives on and planning for closure as this is an area that is particularly under-researched and vulnerable to under-estimation in policy and professional development initiatives. It is acknowledged that further perspectives would extend the value of the research and this work forms the first stage in constructing wider analysis of closure. A further study of the mentors at intervals post-closure will provide longitudinal data about the execution of plans and their effectiveness, from the mentor viewpoint. Clearly, future research with the mentees would provide comparative perspectives on the significance of closure and their experience of it. Whilst acknowledging that this is a small-scale study within a single national context, the findings can inform wider understanding of the importance of effective closure, and the need to ensure it receives adequate time and focus in mentoring relationships. It argues that preparing for closure is an important responsibility of mentoring, constituted by specific actions and behaviours that are both formal and informal, some being time-phase related and others transitional and therefore on-going. These insights should inform policy-makers and stakeholders in teacher development of the need to develop mentor learning and development programmes that adequately support planning for closure as complex and tied to the achievement of goals for mentoring initiatives.

Disclosure statement

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