

Where can I take this? The case for supervision of mentors in Initial Teacher Training

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Background

Since the introduction of the new Initial Teacher Training (ITT) reforms in 2007 there has been a requirement for new teachers to have a professional mentor. This provides teachers who are new to teaching or undertaking a teaching qualification to expect support from a qualified and experienced teacher who will be able to support them in their new role, help them develop the skills needed to be an effective teacher and provide experience of teaching a particular subject. This is a challenging set of skills in itself and does not describe the equally complex skills needed to be an effective mentor. So if we recognise the need to support new teachers how do we support new mentors? There is currently little research into the impact of this policy change on mentors or mentees or the impact on teaching and learning. Further, there has been no research into the role of supervision for mentors. This paper builds on the work of writers such as Hankey (2004) and Rogers (2007) who raise concerns that mentoring is not necessarily a positive experience for the mentor or mentee. It then progresses this argument to suggest that, to improve the quality of the mentoring relationship, it is important to provide mentors with professional supervision. I will use examples and models from other professions, predominantly health care, to provide a framework for the analysis and a starting point for developing a model of supervision to meet the specific needs of mentors in education. I will also use views of mentors gained during group discussions and pilot supervision sessions undertaken as part of a foundation degree module on mentoring and an Action Research Project in the East of England.

The emergence of supervision

Supervision as a concept has emerged from the caring and therapeutic professions but has its origins in charitable work during the nineteenth century. It is often seen as a way for professionals to deal with the most challenging issues presented as part of their work and as a way of using a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to manage those issues effectively and safely. In therapeutic settings, the purpose of a supervision relationship is for the joint exploration of issues presented by the supervisee. It uses dialogue based on the knowledge, skills and experiences of both parties to achieve a better understanding of the issue and of the impact of any action taken in response to

that issue. Whilst supervision has been part of the professional development in health care for some time, it has yet to become part of the experience for mentors in ITT. It is this possibility that I aim to explore.

Definitions

Before embarking on a discussion about the relative merits of supervision, it is necessary to define and discuss mentoring, particularly as much of the literature holds implicit assumptions about the value of mentoring. As Woodd (2001), Matthews (2003) and Dodgson (1986) note, definitions of mentoring are contested and vary according to context. It is difficult to find a definition of mentoring which would suit all settings but it is important for mentors and supervisors to have a 'framework of understanding' (Morris, 2009:243) in order to understand their roles. For the purposes of this article, I will use a definition developed as part of my research with mentors supporting trainee teachers in the voluntary sector. This is:

Mentoring is a dynamic learning relationship which encourages reflection, growth and problem solving for individuals and the organisations in which they work.

A mentor provides support, guidance and stimulation to reflect on and improve skills, knowledge and performance to meet individual and organisational goals.

(Morris, 2009:249)

The problem of definition becomes further complicated when introducing the concept of supervision as it can easily be seen as 'mentoring the mentors' which is not the purpose of supervision I would propose. Therefore, it is important to identify what makes supervision distinct from mentoring as well as showing what it can add to the wider mentoring process. As there are currently no definitions of supervision within the ITT setting, I will draw on definitions from other professions to inform a working definition.

Mentoring, and the supervision that supports it, have been part of the professional development of health care workers for considerably longer than for teachers. As such, there is more evidence available as to the uses and efficacy of supervision in these settings and I will use these to offer possible models for the supervision of mentors in an education setting. This will then lead to a proposed model of supervision which learns from these settings whilst acknowledging the tensions of mentoring for ITT and the specific pedagogical needs of working with teachers.

In a therapeutic setting, Holloway offers the following definition:

Supervision is a formal relationship in which the supervisor's tasks include imparting knowledge, making judgements of the trainee's performance, and acting as a gatekeeper to the profession.

Holloway, 1997:250

Here the description is of a role which somehow safeguards the profession by using supervisors to make judgements as to the ability and performance of the trainee as well as providing knowledge about the profession. In this sense, the existing practices, ideas and beliefs will be perpetuated by the supervisor whilst providing a role model for the supervisee to follow.

Similarly: a model focused on the performance of the supervisee is described by Bernard and Goodyear as:

Clinical supervision is an intensive, interpersonally focused relationship in which...the supervisor is designated to facilitate the development of therapeutic competence in the supervisee.

Bernard and Goodyear, 1992:31

Here, the writers focus on the closeness of the supervision relationship and stress the importance of improving the competence of the supervisee. This seems to have an underpinning concern for the effectiveness of the supervisee to undertake their clinical role safely which would be particularly appropriate in a health care setting.

As part of clinical supervision in nursing, Atkins and Murphy (1994:50) suggest an approach called 'guided reflection'. This requires the following key elements:

- Self awareness
- Accurate recollection
- Identification of key issues
- Critical analysis
- The ability to synthesise new knowledge

Atkins and Murphy see reflection working as a cycle which would be similar to much of the reflective practice used in ITT as it places learning at the centre of the relationship. However, there are some difficulties with this model as it requires high level skills of the supervisee, particularly the ability to recall incidents accurately. It is often difficult to do this when an issue has been particularly challenging or emotive.

Whilst reflection is clearly important, there is likely to be less focus on safety (as a result of the nursing environment) in terms of working with mentors in education. Also, there will be an issue of competence in terms of whether the

mentor is skilled and able to undertake their role, but it will not have the same resonance as that for someone making life and death decisions. This is a critical distinction between supervision in health care and any model that is offered in education – the purpose and outcomes will be different as there are considerably more risks and legislative requirements involved in health care. Also, the interpersonal level at which health care professionals operate is often much more intense than that of an ITT. It is important to frame any models within this scale of intensity and risk. Whilst the concepts and approaches may be transferable, the nature of the issues brought to the supervision session will be very different. On this basis, the definitions and concepts emerging from health care settings which would be appropriate for use with mentors in ITT would be:

- Intensive – as the relationship between the supervisor and mentor demands considerable commitment from both parties
- Interpersonal – as the relationship deals with ‘human’ issues relating to behaviour and emotions (both of the mentor and their mentees)
- competence-focused – as the mentor is required to be effective in supporting their mentees to achieve their ITT qualification
- self-awareness – as the mentor is required to develop this skill in their mentees it is important for the mentor to be able to demonstrate and use high levels of self-awareness themselves

The difference between supervision and mentoring, then, becomes the level at which the relationship operates and the issues which are discussed.

A need for research?

As the formal introduction of mentoring for ITT is relatively new, there is no research which directly asks mentors for their views on the difficulties they face and the support they would find useful. Also, the literature on mentoring, across every field, presents a predominantly positive image of mentoring which means that the need for supervision is rarely acknowledged. Mentoring is seen as having benefits for the mentee (Cunningham, 2005; Matthews, 2003; Britnor-Guest, 2001) and organisation (Kram, 1985; Britnor-Guest, 2001; Matthews, 2003) in particular and some writers identify a positive impact for the mentor (Britnor-Guest, 2001; Kram, 1996; Noe, 1998). The critique of therapeutic interventions by Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) highlights a range of potential problems which can be created when support outweighs challenge. Yet this type of criticism is limited which means that there is no discourse which considers that mentors may need support to tackle difficult professional issues.

Whilst teaching a group of mentors in a FE college, I became aware that they had concerns about how their role was defined, how it was used and whether they had the skills to undertake their role effectively. As part of the training, I facilitated a group discussion around definitions of mentor and mentoring. This discussion quickly became focused on confusions and concerns, in particular –

- lack of time
- lack of clarity about the role of mentor

- overlap with line management responsibilities
- lack of understanding of the requirements of teacher training qualifications
- how to give negative feedback
- how to support trainees through a period of restructuring
- how to deal with challenging or disengaged mentees
- conflict between the needs of the mentee, the mentor, the organisation and the teacher training requirements

These comments prompted me to follow up the discussion with a short questionnaire for the trainee mentors on the use of supervisors to support their role. Of the six trainees, all stated that they felt supervision would be useful, with one saying it was:

‘...essential to ensure the mental safety of the mentor and develop their skills’ (M2)

and another saying, supervision is:

‘...not useful – crucial. To keep mentoring effective and safe mentors must have someone to go to with issues, release and reflect for themselves’ (M1)

All the trainees identified advantages of supervision, stating that it would improve the quality of mentoring, ensure standardisation, provide guidance and provide a sounding board. They also identified disadvantages in terms of cost, constraints to their mentoring styles and possible negative impact of poor supervision.

The discussion and brief questionnaire highlighted a commitment to professional development for the mentors and their need for supervision. It also linked to the lack of current research that tracks the difficulties some mentees have experienced in mentoring relationships. There is very little research that asks for the mentors’ views on negative experiences and no work that draws on the use of supervision to support mentors. From my initial questioning, it appears that there is work to be done to support trainee mentors in the same way as trainee teachers now receive mentor support.

Is supervision the right model of support?

As the concept of mentoring comes from therapeutic settings, it is not necessarily readily transferable to a teaching environment. Also, there is a risk that it becomes another layer of mentoring with mentors mentoring each other. Whilst this may be a way of providing support, it could almost become a never-ending spiral of support if there is no clear differentiation between the roles and approaches. Therefore, a model which offers a distinct role for a supervisor which recognises the specific nature of and difficulties associated with mentoring trainee teachers is more likely to be adopted and used effectively in a sector already struggling to meet statutory requirements (Seddon, 2003).

Using the concerns raised by trainee mentors, the limited literature critiquing mentoring and my own experience in counselling and mentoring settings, I would propose a definition of supervision as

Supervision of mentors in Initial Teacher Training is a problem-focused relationship. It offers a mature and safe environment for mentors to discuss all professional concerns, particularly those that are difficult or emotive. Supervisors will ensure that the mentor feels heard, develop an atmosphere of trust and respect, provide support and offer challenge to ensure the development of professional competence.

I would use this definition to propose a model of supervision as follows:

Supervision functions	Care Control Collegiality
Supervision structure	One-to-one, face-to-face meetings on a monthly basis in the first instance. Boundaries would need to be established at the first session in terms of confidentiality, time limits, expectations and contact arrangements outside the meetings (for emergencies). With time, these meetings may become more or less frequent and may include telephone or on-line support. As the skills of the mentor develop, the structure could become group supervision as the skills, knowledge and expertise of other professional mentors would be a useful progression route for mentors as it would require different ways of working.

In the one-to-one sessions, the role of the supervisor would be to:

- Care – this encompasses duty of care for the mentor and their mentees to ensure that all parties are safe and feel that their needs and concerns are addressed. An important skill for the supervisor is to make sure that the mentor feels that their worries have been heard and that there is something that they can do to improve the situation. This does not mean that the supervisor will take any action, rather that s/he should work with the mentor to challenge assumptions, explore concerns and encourage the mentor to identify their own solutions. For instance, the mentor may be concerned that a mentee has a reputation for drinking at lunchtimes and becoming aggressive with colleagues. The mentor may be presenting this as a difficult situation to deal with in terms of professional standards and the safety of others but it is important for the supervisor to remind the mentor of the need to ensure their own safety as well as that of others.

- Control – this means that the relationship is formal and confidential (within the boundaries of safety), provides a framework for the development of the mentor and a mechanism for checking that practice is effective for the mentee as well as the employing organisation. It also shows that the relationship is not just another layer of mentoring as it is a mature professional relationship that assumes both parties already have well-developed reflective skills. The purpose of the relationship is different as there is likely to be much more challenge involved as well as discussion of sensitive issues. As such, the supervisor has a clear responsibility to control the relationship so that the mentor can examine potentially damaging issues safely. For instance, the mentor may be concerned that a mentee has indicated that they would like a sexual relationship with the mentor and it will be the supervisor's role to open up the possibility that the mentor is using verbal or non-verbal communication in such a way that messages could be mixed.
- Collegiality – this ensures that there is a shared professional understanding of the issues as well as a feeling that the supervisor has the skills and knowledge needed to support (and challenge) the mentor to tackle difficult professional issues. As such, it encompasses both the soft and tough collegiality described by Humes (2007) as it provides a 'climate of niceness' to encourage the mentor to talk but the supervisor is also prepared to ask hard questions to maintain the quality of the service provided. This means that the mentor can bring difficult and uncomfortable issues to the supervision sessions as s/he knows that this will be a safe environment in which to raise doubts, be supported to reflect on actions and identify ways of improving. It is important that the supervisor is not a line manager and that they have the skills, experience and qualifications necessary to have credibility with the mentor. For instance, if a mentor is concerned that they are out of their depth with a particular mentee, the supervisor could offer a shared experience of when they have felt the same and what they did to move forward.

This model offers compassionate challenges to mentors to enable them to face difficult issues, question their own skills and use reflection to remain a safe and effective mentor. It is a more mature and challenging relationship than that between a mentor and mentee as it is likely to deal with more complex and uncomfortable issues, demands high levels of self-awareness and a commitment to professional growth.

Conclusion

Supervision for mentors of teacher-trainees is an area which has received little attention in terms of practice or research. This is likely to be a combination of several factors; the newness of mentoring for ITT, the lack of literature and discourses highlighting potential problems with mentoring, lack of clarity of what the role of supervisor can offer and the lack of funding to support mentors. However, I would suggest that the level of responsibility placed on mentors within

colleges and training providers is very high and that the support needed to be a safe and effective mentor is not available in many settings. Further research is needed to map out the situation, pilot some models of supervision and evaluate the impact of supervision support for mentors (and the subsequent effect on mentees). Also, further work is needed to explore the applicability of supervision models used in other settings and whether supervision can be seen as a distinctive activity in an education setting.

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