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## Positions, storylines and speech acts: How five mentor teachers from EIT's Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) conceptualise their role in the partnership

Viv Aitken, Frances Corkery, and Kirsty Jones

Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT)  
New Zealand

### Abstract

*This article reports on findings of a small-scale study by a group of three teacher educators from the Bachelor of Teaching, Primary (BTP) at the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in Hawke's Bay in 2016. The project began as a replication of a previous study from 2014 in which mentor teachers (MTs) from EIT's partner schools were interviewed about their experiences with transcripts analysed thematically. Analysis of the 2016 interviews generated four themes. Two of these, 'relationship' and 'communication', were identical to the previous study, suggesting MTs continue to value these aspects of partnership. The two other themes 'commitment' and 'collaboration', when compared with the themes of 'investment' and 'interdependence' from the earlier study, appeared to show a maturing and bedding in of the partnership. The project also expanded on the original design with a second level of analysis using positioning theory. Transcripts were analysed for linguistic markers related to positions, storylines, and speech acts, particularly the use of the word 'we'. The positioning analysis found participants offered 24 different categorisations of MT role activity, with only seven of these mentioned more than three times, suggesting these MTs conceptualise the role as complex and open to interpretation. Each MT adopted a distinct stance in describing their approach to candidate teacher support, drawing on metaphors as they did so. Four overarching storylines were identified, covering the benefits of the partnership model (particularly the value of feeling involved in programme design), the demands of being an MT, the challenges of working with candidate teachers and a sense of growing confidence and autonomy within the MT role. As for speech acts, five MTs used the word 'we' to denote personal alignment with their school, two used it to align with EIT or teacher educators (specifically in reference to programme development) and none used it to align with candidate teachers. The findings of this study reinforced the teacher educators' existing understandings about the importance of relationship and communication in the partnership and offered new insights into how these MTs conceptualise their role and operate in their own settings. The findings have been used to inform planning for ongoing MT support at EIT and may be of interest to other Initial Teacher Education programmes, particularly those involving partnerships and mentors.*



## Key words

Practice-based teacher education; mentoring; positioning; partnership

## Context and purpose of study

EIT's Bachelor of Teaching Primary (BTP) is a practice-based degree programme in which candidate teachers spend two days per week in schools and two on campus. The partnership model operates on goodwill in that schools receive a payment from EIT that pays for some of the classroom teaching release for the mentor teacher but no central funding. Initiated by local principals, the programme was first implemented in 2013, with six partner schools, and has grown to include 21 primary schools located in Napier, Hastings, Havelock North, and Gisborne. To date, all graduates of the BTP have secured positions as beginning teachers.

MTs play a crucial role within the design of the BTP. The partnership model articulates the MT role as the professional in-school teaching leader. MTs are selected for their skills as expert practitioners and effective models of teaching. They need to be able to establish strong rapport with junior colleagues and be a critical friend. Each partner school has one MT, responsible for a group of approximately five candidate teachers who are placed in that school for a full year, two days a week. The MT manages the two school-based learning days on behalf of the school and principal, and provides support and guidance to the candidate teachers. MTs have reflective conversations with teacher educators as part of the delivery of the BTP. Teacher educators carry out regular school visits and 'check ins', and there are meetings on campus to discuss candidate teacher progress and requirements of upcoming courses. Teacher educators and MTs also share professional development, and partner in research. The intention of this research project was to explore how one particular group of MTs, four of whom had been with the programme since its inception, conceptualised their role. We were interested whether there were shifts in the thematic findings from the previous study as well as considering new perspectives illuminated by the positioning analysis.

## Literature review

Research in the field of initial teacher education has emphasised the importance of effective integration between coursework and practice (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005) and of communities of practice coming together to establish shared goals and processes to support student teacher learning (Harlow & Cobb, 2014; Wenger, 1998). The part played by the mentor teacher within this partnership has received limited attention in the literature, however. One study by van Ginkel, Oolbekkink, Meijer, and Verloop (2016) looked at conceptions of mentoring amongst mentor teachers, and the motivations and conceptions that inspire teachers to become mentors. The researchers surveyed 726 secondary school mentors in the Netherlands and found key motivations were a desire for personal learning and contribution to the profession. The study identified two broad conceptions of the mentoring role: the first, an 'instrumental' approach where the mentor saw their role as to prepare the student teacher to a certain standard, and the second, a 'developmental' view in which the mentor characterised their role as helping the individual on a personal journey of development (van Ginkel et al., 2016). While the style of mentorship considered in this study differed from the context at EIT, we were interested to compare the motivations of the EIT MTs with the ones identified here, and to consider whether the MTs we interviewed represented the 'instrumental' and 'developmental' conception in their talk. Another study by Davis and Fantozzi (2016) found that student teachers expressed a wide range of hopes for what they would receive from their mentor teachers, including emotional support, instructional support, and socialisation into the realities of teaching. While our study did not extend to considering candidate teachers' perspectives, Davis and Fantozzi's work provided some useful findings for comparing with the themes and storylines within our analysis.

In an Australian study of mentor teachers' attitudes by Izadinia (2016), the key aspects identified by mentors were communication, feedback, nurturing, and support. In the same study, the question of the mentor's impact on teacher identity was also discussed, though it appeared mentors emphasised this more than students did. While the style of mentoring used within the BTP differs from this project, we were interested to compare findings. Also of interest was the way Izadinia asked MTs to employ metaphors to describe and evaluate their role. Punch (2009) notes the use of metaphors as a common method of making sense of an experience and of assisting in conveying meaning, while Lakoff and Johnson go even further, suggesting in *Metaphors we live by* (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008) that people inevitably adopt metaphors as ways to explain experience and in doing so begin to construct the world according to those metaphors. While we did not follow Izadinia's method of actively encouraging MTs to use metaphors, we did locate metaphors in the MTs' talk.

For our study we conducted two levels of analysis. The first was thematic analysis using the constant comparative approach (Mutch, 2013) where the emphasis is on looking for patterns and themes that emerge from the data through a process of "perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships, speculating" (Mutch, 2013, p. 164). For the second level of analysis we drew on positioning theory of Harrē and Lagenhove (1999) and Harrē and Moghaddam (2003). This sociological approach "focuses on understanding how psychological phenomena are produced in discourse" (Harrē & Lagenhove, 1999, p. 4). It extends on role theory by suggesting that roles are not fixed (as words like 'mentor', 'teacher' or 'student' might imply) but subjective and constantly in flux. Positioning theory emphasises how the people fulfilling roles are positioned and position themselves according to the socially constructed "rules that shape the episodes of social life" (Harrē & Lagenhove, 1999, p. 4). Harrē and Moghaddam (2003) suggest positioning can be understood as an interplay between three points on a triangle: *position*, defined as "the cluster of rights and duties to perform certain actions with a certain significance" (Harrē & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5); *storyline*, defined as the "loose cluster of narrative conventions" that unfold in the dynamics of a particular social episode (Harrē & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 6); and *speech and other acts*, defined as "the socially significant actions, movements or speech" performed by someone in a particular situation (Harrē & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 6). The three points on the triangle are seen as mutually dependent in that a change of storyline will affect both position and speech acts. The presence or absence of certain positions will make certain speech acts more or less appropriate and thereby alter the storyline and so on. In our study we used the three points of the positioning triangle to consider positions, storylines and speech acts within in the MTs' interviews. Korobov (2001) argues that a positioning analysis allows the researcher to move beyond *what* the participants have said to consider *how* they said it and what, if anything, this reveals about their perspectives and reconstruction of events:

rather than beginning by looking at what (content) is being talked about, or which interpretive repertoires are being utilized, this performative orientation focuses more on how the narrative is linguistically performed and what this performance means in terms of establishing the narrator's perspective. (Korobov, 2001, p. 11)

While at the first level of analysis our focus was on what the MTs said and the themes that emerged from this, the second level shifted to how the narrators—in this case the MTs—presented themselves to a particular audience and in particular how they used spatial and other language to describe their positioning within the partnership.

A number of research studies drawing on positioning theory exist in the wider literature, particularly in business and management contexts (Hirvonen, 2016; Zelle, 2009). Within education research Redman and Healy (2013) drew on positioning theory to illuminate and challenge the processes used to developing 'mission statements' in two different Australian education institutions. In another study Jensen (2011) used positioning theory to find contradictory discourses in the positioning of adult students within a healthcare training programme. In the context of mathematics, Yamakawa, Forman, and Ansell (2009) found that students responded to the teacher's positioning in constructing and protecting self-evaluations of confidence and success. Meanwhile, McVee, Baldassarre, and Bailey (n.d.) considered the positions adopted by student teachers in a literacy class, particularly in terms of

‘self’ and ‘other’ alignment in relation to race, class, and language use. In our review we found only one research study that considered the role of mentor teachers through the lens of positioning theory; Bullough and Draper (2004) examined how a particular mentor teacher, university supervisor, and student teacher positioned themselves and each other in ways that had negative impacts on the induction of the novice teacher. Another pertinent publication, though not related to mentor teachers, was an article by Herbel-Eisenmann, Wagner, Johnson, Suh, and Figueras (2015), which argued that care needs to be taken when “importing” positioning theory for use in education research, particularly around “conceptual fuzziness” (p. 185) in identifying storylines and narratives at play.

## Methodology and methods

This was a small-scale qualitative project conducted from an interpretivist framework, in that our intention was to analyse socially meaningful action (in this case talk recorded as interviews) to understand and interpret how participants create meanings of their world (Mutch, 2013). The project received approval from the EIT research ethics and approvals committee in February 2016. Potential ethical issues included the fact that the researchers were also teacher educators on the BTP and had pre-existing and ongoing professional relationships with the MTs. In response to this, researchers adopted an ‘appreciative’ stance drawn from Appreciative Inquiry (AI). The AI approach is “based on the assumptions that organizations are socially constructed phenomena ... and that ways of organizing are limited only by human imagination and the agreements people make with each other” (Kessler, 2013, p. 1). The study sought to emphasise strengths in the existing relationship by identifying what was considered by those involved to be positive and effective rather than focusing on a critical interrogation. There was also an evaluative aspect to the study as we sought to gain insights into the perspective of a particular group.

Over a period of weeks, pairs of researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the five MTs in their own schools. These used the same open-ended questions as in the 2014 unpublished study of mentor teachers. In an attempt to minimise constrained responses and allow for anonymous feedback, an online survey was also sent out with the same questions as in the interviews. One MT responded to this survey and those responses were added to the data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Researchers first undertook thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, using manual coding and combing strategies derived from the constant comparative analysis approach outlined in Mutch (2005). First the researchers worked through the data inductively, one transcript at a time, allowing key words and phrases to emerge from the text as much as possible rather than looking for anything in particular. Key words and phrases were highlighted and labels and codes were developed from these. Then, the transcripts were reconsidered question by question so that MTs’ answers could be compared. Researchers carried out this analysis individually before comparing and discussing their codes and themes. Since none of the researchers were directly involved in the 2014 project, we were able to conduct the interviews, coding and analysis without prior awareness of the 2014 findings. For the second level of analysis, the researchers worked deductively. We systematically reviewed the transcripts for language related to roles and positions (including the use of metaphor), storylines (narratives told by the MTs) and speech acts (specifically, the use of spatial and positioning language). We paid particular attention to the use of the word ‘we’ in the MTs’ talk.

## Results/discussion

### First level of analysis—thematic

From the first level of analysis, four themes were generated: Relationships, Communication, Commitment, and Collaboration. Each will be considered in turn and then compared with the themes from the 2014 study.

**Relationship** and relationship building emerged as a key theme across the data. In response to a question about advice for MTs taking on the role, MT4 said, "... build a relationship with the CTs, that's critical and you do that right from the start" (MT4 int 3.5.16). MT3 expanded on this, saying, "Having a connection with each candidate teacher is really important" (MT3 int 3.5.16). MTs all saw the value in strong relationships with teacher educators too. One mentor teacher noted that the teacher educators' visits to the schools affirm the partnership, "They're useful for relationships ... so that you actually feel that you are a team" (MT5 int 10.5.16). Meanwhile, MTs who had been involved in the initial development of the BTP spoke of the particularly strong collegial relationships formed at that time, "There was trust straight away because you were colleagues", and identified this as a point of difference with the BTP and something to be mindful of maintaining, "It's what makes you so different" (MT5 int 10.5.16).

**Communication** was another theme as all five participants referred to the importance of communication between EIT and MTs. All agreed on the central importance of the mentor teacher planning booklets provided by EIT: "... brilliant, they're the best things invented, I reckon" (MT4 int 3.5.16), "They're crucial. They're really crucial" (MT5 int 10.5.16). Personal communication between MTs and teacher educators was also identified as a strength, "If we raise any issues that we can see on the spur of the moment they're dealt with promptly, so that's good" (MT2 int 13.4.16); "There's really good communication between ... us and you ... and so that makes it manageable" (MT1 int 12.4.16).

**Commitment** was identified as a theme in that all five MTs stressed the time and energy it takes to manage, support and mentor candidate teachers. Comments included, "It's a big ask time wise. A big commitment ..." (MT1 int 12.4.16); "I work hard to organise these students and to place them in with teachers and to explain to teachers what their requirements are and how they need to help the students. A lot of work goes into it ..." (MT2 int 13.4.16); "It is quite intense when they don't know anything", "I think it's time that's the biggest challenge" (MT3 int 3.5.16); "The time that teachers need to put into the CTs" (MT4 int 3.5.16); "It's workload" (MT5 int 10.5.16). MTs also identified the cost commitment for their schools, "I don't want financial gain for me. But I think it's a big ask given the financial input from EIT" (MT int 12.4.16).

**Collaboration** emerged as a theme in terms of the operation of the partnership model, MTs' ways of working with school colleagues and their expectations of candidate teachers. MT4 described the partnership as a theory—practice collaboration, with the schools providing the practice, "I interpret whatever comes out of EIT to make it real for the students" (MT4 int 3.5.26). All MTs spoke of how they depend on others in their school, "It's a team approach ... we're very much a team here" (MT 5 int 10.5.16). Two of the MTs who had been involved in the initial development of the BTP recalled a particularly strong sense of collaboration at that time, "We were pioneers ... Each step we were talking—it was 'do-review'—which is a really cool process to go through" (MT4), "We were so included. We were included when you were writing the programme. We bought into the philosophy, into the pedagogy behind it all ... You were depending on us and we were depending on you" (MT5 int 10.5.16). While the use of the past tense in these statements implies that the inclusion and trust have evolved to something else, another comment from the same speaker suggests teacher educators remain responsive to feedback and ideas, "I think you're already tinkering and morphing all the time, so you're responding to the little things that need tweaking" (MT5 int 10.5.16).

The four themes above are strikingly similar to those identified in the 2014 project, which were Relationship, Communication, Investment and Interdependence. Comparing themes between the two projects, Relationship, and Communication remain consistent. The shift from Investment to Commitment reflects the sense MTs now have of the realities of the hard work involved. The shift in the final theme from Interdependence to Collaboration might be explained by the maturing of the programme and the bedding in of the partnership model. That initial necessity for input from both sides into the development phase, described as Interdependence, has developed into implementation that relies on Collaboration.

## Second level of analysis—Positioning theory

### a. Positions

We carried out a deductive analysis of MTs' responses to identify how many activities they ascribed to the mentoring role. Twenty-four distinct categories of role activity were identified with only seven of these mentioned three times or more. This can be seen as evidence of how complex and wide ranging the MTs consider their position to be. Equally, it can be seen as MTs positioning themselves as distinct individuals with a wide “repertoire of socially meaningful acts” (Harrē & Lagenhove, 1999, p. 6) available to them and with the capacity to conduct their role in ways that suit their individual situations, personalities and priorities. This finding was reflected in the content of the talk too. As one MT put it, “I feel like I can do it ... within the guidelines of what they need ... I can do it my way” (MT2 int 13.4.16). Seven categories were seen in three or more transcripts:

1. Building relationships with individual candidate teachers.
2. Supporting candidate teachers.
3. Adhering to/enforcing EIT guidelines.
4. Discussing.
5. Guiding/advising.
6. Clarifying/unpacking requirements.
7. Organising/managing/setting up expectations.

These categories suggest MTs position themselves as primarily responsible for candidate teachers (academic advice and pastoral care) with a secondary responsibility to EIT, in terms of enforcing its requirements. These findings resonate with the studies by Davis and Fantozzi (2016) and van Ginkel et al. (2016), who found widely varying conceptions of the mentoring role amongst mentors and with Izadinia (2016), who found that relationships and support were considered paramount aspects of the mentoring role. The finding around ‘enforcement’ also aligns with Davis and Fantozzi’s study (2016), where mentors positioned themselves as gatekeepers.

We found MTs commonly positioned themselves within their talk through the use of metaphor. Sometimes the use of metaphor was explicit, like the MT who described herself as a “mother hen” and sustained this metaphor throughout the interview (MT4 int 3.5.16). In other cases, the metaphor was more implicit, as in the case of the MT who described her role as organising experiences for the candidate teachers, liaising with EIT, and getting “them into classrooms as much as possible” (MT1 int 12.4.16). Here, while no explicit metaphor was evoked, the self-positioning implies a metaphor something like ‘mentor teacher as facilitator’. Two of the MTs emphasised the importance of inducting students into the team or family of their schools. One of these used the metaphor of “friendly face” (MT3 int 3.5.16) to describe herself and emphasised her availability to the student teachers; the other appeared to story herself more as a ‘coach’ (MT5 int 10.5.16). As for the final MT (MT2 int 13.4.16), the metaphor of ‘the interface’ might be used, as she positioned herself as the locus of exchange between candidate teachers and the staff in her school. This mentor teacher has been in her role for a shorter period of time than the others in the group interviewed and spoke of fielding complaints from school staff and taking responsibility for the actions of the candidate teachers. It is interesting to compare the metaphors employed by the MTs here with those identified by Izadinia (2016), which included ‘parenting’, ‘gardening’, ‘advising’ and ‘coaching’ (see p. 395). Of these, the ‘mother hen’ metaphor is similar to the ‘parenting’ one, while both studies included a ‘coaching’ metaphor. The two other metaphors, ‘facilitator’ and ‘friendly face’, remain quite distinct, however, and cannot really be aligned with ‘gardening’ and ‘advising’. The range of metaphors employed by mentors across the two studies suggests that while there are some shared conceptions the role of a mentor teacher is open to being conceptualised in a number of different ways.

When we carried out ‘member checking’ (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and shared these findings with the mentor teachers, they were hesitant about being associated with a single metaphor, preferring to characterise themselves as shifting between different metaphors at different times. We would stress that in presenting these findings we do not wish to limit the MTs by claiming these as the only metaphors they ever ‘live by’. What is presented here are the dominant metaphors used within a particular piece of talk. Of real interest, we suggest, is not so much what the particular metaphors are but that the participants employed them, and they were all so different from each other. This suggests that, while the role of mentor teacher is quite clearly defined, the individual mentor teachers position themselves within the role in quite different ways.

We also compared the MTs’ self-positionings against the ‘instrumental’ and ‘developmental’ conceptions suggested by van Ginkel et al. (2016). Our analysis showed that the MTs described themselves in both these ways. For example, the ‘mother hen’ (MT4 int 3.5.16) described herself in an instrumental role, “... at EIT they get a hint of practice and it’s my job to make what they learn there a reality in the classroom situation,” and also in a developmental role, “... I just love growing teachers (pause) simple as that.” This group of MTs seemed to draw on both conceptions, perhaps because the mentoring relationship is sustained over an extended period of time. So, while it was interesting to consider van Ginkel’s et al.’s two lenses, in this case, we questioned the usefulness of categorising in this way.

### *b. Storylines*

As researchers, we experienced some of the ‘conceptual fuzziness’ described by Herbel-Eisenmann et al. (2015) when it came to deducing the storylines within the MTs’ talk. We struggled to distinguish storylines from ‘themes’ or patterns that recur in the data. Harrē and Moghaddam (2003) describe a storyline as an unfolding narrative told at a particular time, particularly where this “follows already established patterns of development” and includes socially developed “narrative conventions” (p. 6). So, for our analysis, we chose to see storylines as unfolding narratives told with emphasis, even if these appeared only once. After identifying the narratives within individual interviews we merged them to present four overarching storylines. We do not suggest that they represent all the MTs, nor that they were fixed views, only that they were storylines that emerged through the data.

#### *Storyline 1: The practice-based partnership model, while not perfect, has huge benefits for candidate teachers, for schools and for children.*

One clear storyline that four of the five mentor teachers presented was around the benefits of the apprenticeship model of initial teacher education. This storyline encompassed benefits for the candidate teachers, “I think the programme’s a fantastic way to train teachers” (MT2 int 13.4.16); “I just like the way they’re getting practical experience ... while they train. It’s awesome” (MT2 int 13.4.16). It also encompassed benefits for the school, “It’s an absolute win for the school” (MT5 int 10.5.16), and for teacher’s practice, “... people have opened up their practice. I think that’s a staff benefit” (MT1 int 12.4.16); “I think it freshens up the thinking of the teachers” (MT2 int 13.4.16); “Our classrooms are a lot more open ... it just lifts the bar a little bit” (MT4 int 3.5.16). Also associated with this storyline was an account of benefits for children, particularly in having candidate teachers from their own cultural backgrounds, “Māori—we’ve been ... getting Māori in here and that’s made a big difference for our Māori children and our ability to provide for our Māori children” (MT5 int 10.5.16). There were some challenges and issues identified by MTs, which included school-based learning requirements sometimes not aligning with the realities of school timetabling and organisation, concerns over whether enough time was spent on certain curriculum learning areas, and varying opinions on what constitutes ‘best practice’.

*Storyline 2: It's really hard being an MT but we do it for the good of the profession.*

As noted in the thematic analysis earlier, MTs all related storylines about the challenging workload and the time commitment required of the role. This was perhaps the strongest storyline encountered in the transcripts, both in terms of how consistently and emphatically it was spoken of across the group. Three MTs expanded the storyline of workload further, by presenting their hard work as a contribution to the future of teaching, "I thought I had something to contribute to help your teachers start with ... on their journey to becoming a great teacher" (MT2 int 13.4.16); "I've got an opportunity to show that teaching's in good hands" (MT4 int 3.5.16); "I have a passion for growing great teachers" (MT5 int 10.5.16). While one of these mentor teachers chose more tentative language, the other two appear to show a stronger sense of their identity as contributors. This aligns with Boreen, Johnson, Niday, and Potts's (2000) finding that mentors often find their position enables them to 'give back' to the profession.

*Storyline 3: It can be tough dealing with candidate teachers who are failing but it doesn't directly impact MTs.*

All the MTs spoke about how they navigated relationships with candidate teachers who struggled with requirements or failed courses and the impact of students leaving the course. One talked about the strong effect on another teacher in their school when a candidate teacher had failed practicum, "(The teacher) took that hard ... and she found that really difficult" (MT1 int 12.4.16). Another spoke of the effect on the other candidate teachers within the school, "That knocks the rest of the group a bit" (MT2 int 13.4.16). None of the MTs identified a particularly strong impact on themselves. Indeed, two of them spoke about the minimal impacts on their school and themselves, "I don't feel it's had any impact on the school whatsoever ... it wasn't a big deal" (MT3 int 3.5.16) and, "I haven't really been involved in the really tough things ..." (MT1 int 12.4.16). This suggests that MTs, while strongly invested in the candidate teachers' success, maintain a personal/professional boundary. Another possibility is that MTs are not directly involved in assessment or disciplinary matters involving candidate teachers. MTs record attendance and notify concerns, but any actions or decisions about a candidate's progress are taken by the teacher educators and programme co-ordinator, with MTs and schools not necessarily informed (as a matter of privacy). Based on this finding, it would seem the BTP's approach provides some degree of protection for mentor teachers from the 'really tough things' so that they can focus on an affirming stance within their pastoral and professional role. Programmes where mentors are directly involved in assessment might expect different storylines to emerge.

*Storyline 4: The way I've carried out the MT role has evolved over time.*

MTs all talked about changes in their role over the three years of the degree. Only one MT stated there had been little change to her role over the course of the three years, though she did note a growth in the candidate teachers' confidence, and in their contribution to school life as they progressed through the degree, which resulted in her role becoming less time consuming. Two MTs presented a view that their role was more involved with the year one candidate teachers and got easier over time. Another MT noted the role with candidate teachers in year one was easier because the requirements were more structured, whereas year three was "quite challenging because of them (candidate teachers) doing their inquiries ... so it kept shifting from one week to the next" (MT5 int 10.5.16). For three of the MTs the shift was identified in terms of 'letting go' and allowing candidate teachers to take responsibility for themselves, "I've changed in terms of how much do you do for people, or how much do you leave them and help them to see for themselves ... handing over power to them rather than holding it" (MT3 int 3.5.16); "[At first] I tried to do everything and it was ... while it was rewarding I realised I didn't need to. So I've let go a little bit ... a little bit!" (MT4 int 3.5.16).

Four of the five participants also reported a shift in their stance with teachers in their school since the beginning of the EIT programme. Four of the MTs reported increased trust between themselves and

the teachers in the school and finding strategies to delegate and reduce pressure on themselves. Comments included, “At the beginning I would sidle up to teachers and (ask permission) ... Whereas, now I can send (an email), attach the programme and say ‘see me if there’s any issues’” (MT1 int 12.4.16); “I’ve made change for my own sanity ... I’ve put more responsibility on the teachers out there in the school” (MT4 int 3.5.16). The one mentor teacher who did not narrate a shift in her approach to teaching staff is the one who has only been involved for two years. This suggests that the positioning between mentor teachers and schools may shift over time, becoming more relaxed as mentor teachers and staff habituate into their roles.

### c. *Speech acts*

For this part of the positioning analysis, we paid particular attention to how the word ‘we’ was used by the mentor teachers within the interviews. This was seen as an indication of alignments.

**Mentor teacher–school alignment.** In all five interviews, the word ‘we’ was most frequently used by the interviewees to mean ‘myself as MT + my school’. This suggests that these MTs identify themselves first and foremost as members of a school community. This is not surprising, given the long-term identification with their professional community.

**Mentor teacher–teacher educator alignment.** Only two MTs used the word ‘we’ to mean ‘myself as mentor teacher + you as teacher educators’ or ‘My school + EIT’. This was when they were reflecting on how the programme began, and their active role in its establishment, “We were pioneers— Each step we were taking we were thinking ‘gosh’—and it was sort of ‘do-review, do review’ which is a really cool process to do through” (MT4 int 3.5.16), and “We’ve really felt like we were on that journey together, ay?” (MT5 int 10.5.16). We consider this a significant finding. As noted earlier the mentor teacher’s talk was extremely positive about the quality of the relationship and particularly the communication between MTs and teacher educators. However, when the details of the talk were analysed, the word ‘we’ was never used to position the MTs and teacher educators as a current collective. This was a piece of non-confirming data in terms of the researchers’ initial hunches. We thought we might see in the MTs’ talk a clearer sense of alignment with the institution and the teacher educators as teaching partners. On reflection, we did note that our own research questions did not model the use of ‘we’ to align MTs and teacher educators, so we may have set up a convention of speech that the MTs followed. Notwithstanding this limitation, this finding appears to reinforce the idea that from these MTs’ perspectives the programme is operating in two distinct spheres—campus and school.

**Mentor teacher–mentor teacher alignment.** Only two comments from the five participants used the word ‘we’ or ‘us’ to denote a sense of alignment with her fellow MTs. This was another interesting and non-confirming finding for the researchers who often encounter the MTs as a group when they come together for on-campus meetings, so may have assumed this is how they saw themselves. Having said that, the content of one MT’s comment about the MTs, “We’re a tight knit group”, suggests that for her at least, the alignment between MTs is a significant and close one. It is also reasonable to assume that this finding may have been different if the interviews had been conducted as a focus group, as in the previous study, since then the MTs would have been more likely to use ‘we’ as part of the conversation.

**Mentor teacher–candidate teacher alignment.** Across all five transcripts, the word ‘we’ was used only very occasionally to indicate ‘MT+CTs’, as in, for example, “we meet every Wednesday after school” (MT3 int 3.5.16). In almost every statement the mentor teachers used the term ‘they’ to position the candidate teachers in their school as a group and as a discrete entity from the dominant collective of the school staff. This may reflect the fact that candidate teachers are in school only two days per week, they move to a new school after a year and they are no longer employed by the school. It was also very noticeable that within the *content* of their talk, all five MTs emphasised the importance of building relationships with individual candidate teachers, all recalled the names and personal details of past candidate teachers and all demonstrated high levels of concern about them. So

while the discourse suggests the candidate teachers are not embraced in the ‘we’ of the staff identity, this does not imply that relationships with candidate teachers is any less of a priority.

## Implications

The analysis of interviews from this small research project include implications both for the BTP and for teacher education more generally.

The findings confirm that the partnership between EIT and schools is important to its continuing success and that the hard work and commitment of MTs is central to this. The four themes identified (Relationships, Communication, Commitment, and Collaboration) reflect what this group of MTs consider important in their enactment of their roles in the partnership model; the implication for EIT is that these four elements must be respected, considered, and nurtured as part of the ongoing partnership. This is particularly true of Relationships and Communication, which have endured since the inception of the programme. Considering that in several interviews MTs noted that their motivation sprang from their desire to contribute to the wider profession, EIT might further build the relationship by recognising and celebrating their contribution in some tangible manner such as a formal letter of appreciation. The strong links forged between schools and EIT during the programme development and initial implementation phase will need to be sustained and maintained as the programme matures and personnel change. One way of doing this could be to develop some kind of formal process that inducts newcomers into the practicalities and the philosophies of the partnership. The finding that MTs have changed the way they have enacted their roles over time might mean that this pioneer group is in the position to mentor new MTs, by giving them the benefit of the experiences they have found through trial and error.

It was noted in our study that mentor teachers had some shared and some different conceptions of the mentoring role. This aligns with the findings in the literature reviewed at the start of this paper: a number of studies have identified the wide-ranging conceptions of mentoring amongst mentor teachers. However, where other authors suggest this is an issue that needs addressing (for example, Davis and Fantozzi (2016) who suggest that mentors may require more support and training in the role) we suggest a different view. Within a small-scale practice based programme such as the BTP we suggest there is value in MTs having autonomy to carry out the role their own way. MTs have flexibility within their roles and enjoy enacting and evolving the role in response to their own personal style. Given that MTs revealed aspects of their mentoring style through the use of metaphor, and where they did not, we were able to discern or suggest a possible metaphor. It might be beneficial to encourage MTs to review their practice using metaphors, with the mentor teacher briefings acting as a space for this to occur. Explicitly drawing out metaphors might also be a useful exercise for new MTs as they learn about their new role, supporting them to visualise their position and define their personal/professional boundaries.

A question for EIT (and other providers working in partnership) is how to acknowledge, support, and celebrate the autonomy of mentor teachers while seeking to provide consistent school experiences for candidate teachers. Teacher educators might consider those aspects of courses and candidate teacher practice which are ‘non-negotiables’ and ensure that these are directly communicated going forward. This will depend on maintaining strong and trusting relationships between MTs and teacher educators as well as ongoing opportunities for discussion, clarification and communication provided by mentor teacher briefings and the MT planner. Given the appreciation these mentor teachers expressed for the mentor teacher planner, another implication for teacher educators is to ensure the document is produced in a timely fashion and without errors.

The positioning analysis showed these mentor teachers aligned themselves much more strongly with their school than with EIT, teacher educators or candidate teachers. This suggests their experience of partnership is not one of merging into ‘one-ness’ but of co-operation between distinct entities towards the same goal. This is a reminder that stakeholders within a practice-based model will have their own

priorities, which can be seen as a strength. The alignment is only problematic if mentor teachers see themselves and their schools as the sole representatives of the *practice* of teaching with the teacher educators and EIT providing the *theory*. This is a binary that the BTP has sought to contest from the beginning. While ‘best practice’ is always the goal, what this means is not easily defined and is not located solely in either sphere. Continuing to have conversations about the interplay of theory and practice on campus and in school may be important as part of MT briefings and school visits.

The MTs in this study showed themselves as satisfied with and supportive of the partnership model. This suggests that integrating a network of personnel involved in supporting candidate teachers has been a successful model for the BTP. The involvement of mentor teachers in a co-constructed programme developed by schools, community and tertiary institution is a contributing feature to that success. There is of course a cost to building and sustaining these relationships both financially and in terms of time and energy and this study has reinforced this. Existing programmes working in an environment with less school-based practice might consider how elements of the mentoring role illuminated here might be enacted in their context. It could be that this apprenticeship style of initial teacher education might be adopted more widely, although it is recognised that this would be dependent on factors such as a supportive tertiary institute and strong support from a group of local schools.

For the researchers, this project has been valuable in gaining a better understanding of the role of the mentor teacher and further developing the research culture among the teacher educator team.

## Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, the focus here was firmly on the mentor teacher role and so the implications discussed here refer only to this aspect of the partnership model. There are, of course, multiple factors contributing to the success of the BTP programme, but these lie beyond the scope of this study.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and short time frame. As stated in the methodology this was a small-scale qualitative project and did not seek to generate generalisable findings. The project was limited to exploring perceptions of a particular group of mentor teachers about their current and ongoing roles as stakeholders in the BTP degree programme and of the three-way relationship between the tertiary provider (EIT), candidate teachers and themselves. It made no attempt to capture the experiences of other stakeholders such as principals, candidate teachers, teacher educators or indeed other MTs.

The fact that researchers were also teacher educators with an ongoing relationship with the five MTs should also be acknowledged. Data was limited to what participants in this position were comfortable to say to the researchers. Aspects of the study design (e.g., how questions were worded, the use of individual interviews instead of focus groups as in the 2014 project, even the use of space in the interview rooms) will also have had impacts on the data. For example, the use of individual interviews which enabled the researchers to gain more depth in each participant’s answers also meant interviewees were unable to springboard responses from each other. As for interview questions, while the choice to revisit questions used in the 2014 project was useful for comparing the responses, we noticed on analysing the respondents’ use of the word ‘we’ that the word had not appeared within our own questions either. Had researchers used the word ‘we’ more intentionally, we might have seen different data on this from the MTs. We acknowledge that the act of research is itself about positioning participants, so that certain speech acts and storylines are more likely to emerge.

## Future research

A number of future possibilities for research can be identified arising from this project. Some emerge from limitations in the project, while others can be seen as new questions arising from the research.

Having now completed two cycles of interviews with this group of mentor teachers, and with interesting results from comparison of those findings, it could be worthwhile to repeat the exercise again in another two years, to see how these mentor teachers' conceptions of their role continues to develop. Also, since this study only examined the perspectives of MTs, future research could investigate candidate teachers' perspectives on the mentoring model employed within the BTP. In particular, given our findings about the diverse ways that MTs view and perform the role, it may be beneficial to focus on the experiences of candidate teachers as they move between different MTs over the three years of the programme. It would also be pertinent to gain perspectives from other stakeholders in the programme, including principals, teacher educators and children. A change of stance could also be fruitful. The two studies to date have deliberately taken an appreciative stance (Kessler, 2013) focusing on the responses of those partner schools that have stayed with the programme. As the BTP matures, it could be beneficial to include responses from the small number of schools that have left the programme. The sample could also be widened to include perspectives of other mentor teachers. Only one of the participants here was not in the 'pioneer' mentor teacher group, and her thinking was sufficiently different to suggest that MTs who have joined the programme could offer useful and different insights into their experience. Finally, the usefulness of 'metaphors' as a means for MTs to encapsulate and evaluate their role might be further explored. These emerged spontaneously within our study but could be consciously used (as in Izadinia, 2016).

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