A Partnership in Induction and Mentoring: Noticing How we Improve Our Practice

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Abstract: This article focuses on the induction and mentoring of early career teachers. The context is a suburban primary school in Victoria, Australia, as the school develops mentoring networks for graduate and beginning teachers. Instigated from a school–university partnership, the research draws from the traditions of practitioner research. In the research design and likewise in successful mentoring the importance of a genuine commitment to the discipline of reflective practice or what we have come to describe as " noticing " (Mason, 2002; Moss et al., 2004) is illustrated. The approach offers a new method for small scale–close up research in teacher education.

This research is an outcome of a school-university partnership with local schools that commenced in 2002. Ewing (2002) points to the paucity of accounts that attempt to describe, analyse and understand the explicit nature and characteristics of successful professional learning cultures and the processes by which transformed cultures are realized (p. 23). The study is set in an Australian primary school and is a small scale, school–based research design that utilises "the discipline of noticing " (Mason, 2002; Moss, 2004) as the research approach. Outlining how in supportive contexts, collaboration brings rich and mutually satisfying professional outcomes for teachers and academics alike, the analysis reveals there is much to be understood about mentoring and induction if we are to sustain learning and change as an activist teaching profession (Sachs, 2003). In Australia, school–university partnerships have a documented history. Given the continuing pressure for teacher education to focus on issues of professionalisation and collaborative relationships, partnerships with schools are seen as significant links in strengthening these relationships (Ramsay, 2000; Department of Education Science and Training 2003; University of Melbourne, 2002). Accounts of the legitimacy and outcomes of partnerships have a continuing relevance to schools, school systems and the higher education sector.

Whilst much has been written about the benefits such as improvement of learning for both teachers, teacher educators and their students, there is growing recognition that the likelihood of ongoing collaboration can be adversely affected by the conditions that exist in the participating institutions (Peters, 2002, p.239). When examining the practice of mentoring and induction through "noticing" what can we attend to? And how are we attending to an issue central to early career socialisation? How would an activist teaching profession understand induction and mentoring?

What is mentoring and induction?

Within teacher education mentoring and induction models largely draw from understandings of constructivism. Constructivist epistemology, with its associated features of situated cognition, scaffolding, cognitive apprenticeship and reflection, typically embrace an authentic context that reflects the way the knowledge will be used in real life through:

- authentic activities;
- access to expert performance and the modelling of processes;
- multiple roles and perspectives;
- reflection;
- collaborative construction of knowledge;
- articulation of personal values and beliefs;
- coaching and scaffolding (Baird & Love, 2003).

There are no single agreed meanings in the literature on what constitutes induction and/or mentoring for the new teacher. It is well known that mentoring provides a wide range of opportunities for mentors and mentees to engage in discourse communities around pedagogy and reflective thinking (Hudson, 2007) and the development of optimal mentoring relationships (Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop, 2007; Feiman –Nemser, 2001).

An ERIC search using the keyword *induction* defined the term as beginning teacher orientation, whilst the London EPPI–Centre (The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co–ordinating Centre) provides a broader description, integrating a definition and practical understanding of induction. The later definition includes comprehending the socialization process that the beginning teacher goes through (both at a social and professional level) and suggests that induction processes also incorporate an element of assessment, arguing that induction is "a hurdle that must be crossed; if new teachers in England fail to meet the induction standards, they are barred from teaching in a state–maintained school" (EPPI–Centre 2004, p.3). As Moore–Johnson et al. (2005) indicate:

> although the terms induction and mentoring are often used interchangeably, they are conceptually distinct. Induction programs often include one-to–one mentoring of new teachers alongside other supports, such as classroom management seminars and peer observation sessions (p.87).

The Department of Education and Training, Victoria (DE&T) defines mentoring as "a two way professional collegiate partnership which contributes to the growth and development of both partners" (DE&T, 2003, p.4). Moore–Johnson and colleagues argue that any conceptual differences around the definition of induction and mentoring documented in the literature, do not negate the commonality to provide support to beginning teachers and alleviate new teacher anxiety. In some documents, particular emphasis has been on the potential benefits for helping beginning teachers identify student needs, plan for differentiated instruction and ensure equitable learning outcomes. Significantly Moore–Johnson (2004) sees the alleviation of the distinct binary between new and experienced teachers as significant. When involved in mentoring and induction, the research points to benefits for both groups:

> There are no separate camps of veterans and novices; instead, new teachers have ongoing opportunities to benefit from the knowledge and expertise of their experienced colleagues. Mentoring is organised to benefit both the novice and the experienced teachers, and structures are in place that further facilitate teacher interaction and reinforce interdependence (Moore – Johnson, 2004, p.159).

To date the "retention " view built on mentoring and induction programs is held as the key to securing graduates in the profession. (DE&T, 2003; Dowding, 1998; Moss, Fearnley–Sander & Moore, 2002; White & Moss, 2003; Scottish Government, 2001; Willet & Singer, 1991). Liston, Whitcomb and Borko's (2006) recent research, considers the differing roles schools and universities play in teacher preparation and the early years of teaching. They ask whether teacher education does too little or too much and whether we know enough about the development of the new teacher and the contexts in which this development takes place (p. 351). Further, the literature accords the need to provide adequate support systems for beginning teachers which improve not only teachers' sense of confidence in the classroom but integrate them into the whole–school culture and set the course for improved professional practice in future years. Mentoring and induction when well–conceived, carefully implemented, and soundly supported by the schools in which new teachers work, have been shown to positively affect the retention of early career teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Moore – Johnson et al., 2005).

The Research Site

Beaumont Primary the pseudonym for the school in this study, is state government funded and located in a bayside suburb about 22km south–east of the city of Melbourne, Victoria. With an enrolment of approximately 600 students and lengthy history within the area, the school is considered an integral part of the local community. The organisation of the school centres on a number of team structures. Five types of teams exist in the school — grade level teams; sub–school teams; key learning area teams; senior management team; and a school charter priority team. While all teams have an important role to play in the organisation of the school, the team that has the most direct influence on the curriculum taught in the school is the grade level team. These teams establish year, term and weekly planners that detail the expected learning outcomes for students. The grade level teams are highly supportive of their members. Graduate teachers are coached by all team members. The operation of grade level teams owes much to the work of Johnson (2003) and his conception of professional learning teams within a learning organisation**.**

Practitioner research and noticing

This research located in the field of practitioner research and reflective practice takes up the method of the "discipline of noticing" (Mason, 2002; Moss, 2004), as a way of working through the messiness experienced by practitioners researching their own practice. In understanding and researching the cultural studies of schooling, stories, images and documents generate data (Moss, 2003; Moss, 2004). These textual forms are often in the hands of educators as they work. To imagine theory building within the site of practice Jean McNiff (1993, p.18) suggests that:
  - each individual may legitimately theorise about her own practice, and aim to build theories;
  - the action of theorising as a process is a concept more appropriate to educational development than the state of referencing a theory. In this view, people change their practices, and their practices change them; and
  - the interface between person and practice is a process of theory building, which involves a critical reflection on the process of "reflection in action", and which legitimates the notion of a changing individual interacting with the world.

The challenge to the pragmatic professionals is "that educational practitioners need to move outside of their professional practice and into the distinct activity of educational research. This is essential if they are to generate the dialogue between research and practice that is necessary for mutual development" (Brown & Dowling 1998, p.162). To ensure that professional practice is linked to the distinct activity of research and possible within the world of everyday work remains an ongoing challenge. Popkewitz and Brennan remind us that a social epistemology locates the "objects by objects constituted by the knowledge of schooling as historical practices through which we understand power relations. Statements and words are not signs or signifiers that refer to fixed things but social practices that generate action and participation" (1997, p. 293). The methodology in this research envisions potential for doubling our meanings – if in our theory building we " move towards practices of academic writing that are responsible to what is arising out of both becoming and passing away " (Lather, 1996, p.18), we can know the fragility of practice yet see everyday work as a place for liberation with possibilities for change.

Throughout this study, Denni and Bobby the two key participants from the school site, presented an understated stance of their contribution to school change, the impact within their local context and the wider understanding of induction and mentoring. Having successfully built her career as an accomplished teacher, Denni was a respected school deputy and administrator. Bobby was a leading teacher, a position gained through the school based promotion process, judged on excellence in teaching and learning. Part of the role description of a leading teacher involved a contribution to mentoring and school wide collegial learning. The apologetic statement spoken by Denni and Bobby "we are not doing much really"; when foregrounded by critical research processes and Mason's discipline of noticing, offers "to others opportunities to experience and test out alterations in the structure of their attention" (Mason, 2002, p.183). As informants and participants in a school –university research partnership we share an interest in not only what people do and did in respect to a significant current issue, but we were interested in what might happen, "in the development, in what could be, in what is possible and how that possibly might be actualised " (Mason, 2002, p. 181). Further as Mason states:

> The researcher focuses on useful sensitivities and effective actions (in their experiences) *and* on how to make these available to colleagues so that they too can recognise them as potentially useful, and sufficiently aware of possibilities to try them out in practice themselves...The process of refinement is then also part of the research, as people report back on what they have noticed in trying out what they saw as possibilities in their situation (Mason, 2002, p. 181).

The following table, drawing from the work of Mason (2002) details the research design and approach. The approach as indicated above emphasises how actions and experiences are put on notice and allow for the necessary refinements that apply to the research problem, in our case the issue of mentoring and induction to occur over time.

Questions asked	Mentoring for graduate and beginning teachers: What are we attending to?
Objects of the study	What is mentoring? How can school university partnerships develop? What can one school achieve over a year–long program?
Purpose of the study	To understand the roles, interpretations and collaborative actions of the social actors connected to mentoring in one school site.
Data production	Short three item open ended survey suitable for school staff meeting distribution and collection. Document analysis, school and state policy documents and resources. Narratives from two school based key informants and university partners. The experience as a result of engagement with the moments of "noticing".
Analysis	Examining the account, seeking significance, interrogating experience, threading themes, seeking multiple interpretations connected with accounts and theories in the literature, refining sensitivities to notice and to act.
Claims	"The only claims made are that certain things worth noticing, certain phenomena which others may wish to look out for, and certain actions which others may wish to consider trying in some modified form " (Mason, 2002, p.186).
Products	Enhanced awareness of the possibilities and choices in the moment "Reports of incidents and experiences of the research process itself are secondary" (Mason, p. 186).
Validation	The experience and its specific relationship to time, place and situation. This "(g)enerally lies in whether future action is informed, and whether readers are alerted to something they can test out in their own experience " (Mason, 2002, p.186).

Table 1: Research Design and Method

The Beaumont induction and mentoring initiative

This inquiry began when the Beaumont school community recognized they were experiencing variable success with early career teachers and the overall retention of graduates was very poor. Support for beginning teachers was therefore needed and it was increasingly evident that longer term workforce planning issues required strategic attention. Since 2000 the staffing demographic of Beaumont Primary School had changed considerably. Staff left due to retirements and mid career professionals were on family leave. The employment of two graduates each year between 2000 – 2003 was viewed as a move to counter staff turnover. Not only was there a need to up skill new teachers, but also there was an obligation to ensure that professional growth was provided for beginning teachers. By the end of 2001, the ETWR (Experienced Teacher with Responsibility) positions were planning and documenting the induction and mentoring process including the development of an information manual for

teachers who were new to the school. Broadly linked to the school charter focus of improvement in staff well–being, professional development and the development of individual professional development plans these teaching and learning priorities became central to the role of the professional action team. In 2002 an Induction Program specifically for the Beaumont context was developed and published. A "buddy" program became part of the induction strategy. Graduates and returning teachers were supported by an induction operations booklet developed by senior staff of the school. Later that year through the contact with University-School Partnership and the development of the school based research focusing on induction and mentoring; the community set about to provide a structure that was enabling of all staff to work with a mentor. Little action had taken place in this first year, but early into the following year, all teaching staff, 21 in total were surveyed for qualitative responses on induction and mentoring issues. Three survey items were prepared and anonymous written responses sought:

What is a mentor?
What could you offer as a mentor?
A mentor could assist me with...

Following the survey completion, expressions of interest in the mentor/mentee relationship were sought. Potential mentors and mentees completed the "Teacher self–assessment competency checklist" (DE&T, 2002, pp 84–85). Two experienced teachers, and three graduates in their first year of teaching responded. The mentoring coordinators matched mentors and mentees. The intention was to avoid matching teachers at the same grade level because it was believed that the mentor–mentee relationship was an additional avenue of professional support that was independent of other school structures, echoing the sentiments found in the recent literature, such as those articulated by Moore–Johnson (2005) and cited earlier is this paper.

By the end of February 2003 the partnerships were formed and a schedule of meeting times for the year agreed upon. Mentors and mentees commenced meeting. The sessions were around 1 hour, but the arrangements were commonly individually negotiated between the pairs. The meetings initially set at a regular pattern, evolved on a "needs" basis. The sharing of the Professional Development Plan (PD) plan between mentee and mentor was encouraged. The coordinator was available for informal discussions and 1:1 meetings with mentors. Broadly the coordinator supported the pairs with opportunities for

–sounding out ideas
–debriefing
–maintaining focus, particularly when issues of confidentiality arose
–extension ideas
–general advice and support
–the mentor to act as a "conduit " for performance feedback.

The mentors and mentees were encouraged to discuss and share their PD planning and how this linked with their Performance and Development Plan. These meetings continued during the school year and concluded in October 2003.

Locating the practice of mentoring and induction

From the initial open ended survey questions distributed to the staff in February 2003, the 21 responses returned indicated that the majority of teachers interchanged the terms induction and mentoring. The areas of assistance that the experienced teachers perceived were relevant to the

new graduates were largely related to technical and school specific issues. The experienced teachers cited examples of accessing relevant materials and resources, school information and expectations, official policy, methods for discipline, parent interviews and curriculum content. Overall the responses did not strongly reflect that a mentor could help to build a professional knowledge base and support systematic inquiry of practice. Most offers were collegial in orientation, such as providing friendship, encouragement and support and sharing knowledge of school operations. Field notes of discussions recorded on the school visits affirmed that both Denni and Bobby as the joint coordinators were central to ensuring the momentum of the program. They communicated that being responsive to the complexity of the roles and relationships that are hidden in developing induction and mentoring practises are crucial. As they reported:

> There has been enormous benefit to mentees – skills and practical level etc. For mentors, it gave them a tool for personal reflection about their own practice – mentoring is a two way street – if one is going to give advice, one must be willing to question the self. With Mark, the program gave him the opportunity to take on a role of experienced teacher. Despite being "new" to the school he established another sort of "professional presence" that may have taken longer had he not become a mentor. Those who volunteer to become mentees must be willing to be involved in professional trust – there is a degree of risk–taking. There needs to be non– threatening engagement of all parties. The culture of the school has a lot to do with people's feelings. Also there are traps for the unwary, the line between mentor and counsellor, and the lack of formality/structure/ongoing support to relationships, the breakdown of one relationship highlighted this.

Denni and Bobby's perceptions of living the theory of induction and mentoring over a twelve month period and their interrogation of the role and function of being a mentor were influenced by the professional learning opportunities they undertook. Their learning drew from access to a formal program, professional reading and a close attention to the policy framework and materials developed by the Department of Education and Training,Victoria. As coordinators, Denni and Bobby were the first to acknowledge that the program at the conclusion of the 2003 year was still, "finding its feet", and was "slow to get going and the small number of participants and the limited target group probably added to this". From the coordinator's perspective, the mentoring program began to fill a previously unmet need. When asked the question "What have we learned for our school?" Denni and Bobby identify that mentoring requires a school wide culture that lends active support to a program of induction and ongoing support. Barriers to the further development of mentoring include staff commitment and the time to meet formally. They believe professional learning should at minimum cover four two hour sessions and the process should be located in grade teams. Moreover they argue that mentoring programs should be inclusive of career trajectories, beginning and experienced teachers alike and should consider succession planning. They give weight to a formal program and the use of documentation that details roles and responsibilities, and open communication, such as a diary being exchanged between mentor and mentee. They recommend a form of ongoing monitoring, such as a basic checklist that defines the stages of the program at minimum and suggest feedback to all participants on progress and significant incidents should be formalised. Finally they state that sunset times on relationships will exist and planning and deciding when the formal relationship will continue is a distinct marker in the program. Bobby and Denni also recognise there are further questions to be raised. They ask:

- How can reflective practice be built into the process?
- How can mentees be more empowered in the process/relationship?
- Will informal mentoring be more likely to occur in planning teams?
- What are the links with Performance and Development Plans, links with Professional Teaching Standards?

Indeed these questions and other intricate mappings that Bobby was sketching out as the possibilities for the development of the ongoing program, indicate that professional work and professional worth are inseparable. For all participants in this project, the activation of professional worth, through action in consultation with a network of others forms a key link to the forming and strengthening of collaborative relationship, whether as a mentor, mentee or university partner. For over a decade, research and practice has pointed to the growing importance of mentoring and induction and the contribution made (which begins in teacher education) to early career entry and broader professionalisation, inclusive of all members of the teaching profession. In 1998, for example in the Australian Journal of Teacher Education, Murray, Mitchell and Dobbins, noted the reciprocal benefits of the role of mentoring for pre service teachers and mentors in a university program. Since 2007, the Australian Journal of Teacher Education has published papers from Australian and international contributors (see Coombs Richardson, Glessner & Tolson, 2007; Hudson & Millwater, 2008; Paris, 2010), alerting readers to continuing research on mentoring and induction and the significance of this evidence in the reconceptualisation of teacher education.

In Australia, there are continuing questions surrounding what constitutes support in the early years of professional life. The visibility of professional teaching standards and the introduction of national standards for teacher education are ever present. Kay Martinez, an Australian academic who has longstanding links with the practice of teacher education and induction notes mentoring is a contested issue, and one not without problems. "(M)entoring, like other educational practices, is not neutral" (Martinez, 2004, p. 95). She asserts that although this process can be positive, in the mentor's assistance of the mentoree, she also recognises the potential for "perpetuation of existing practices and patterns of inequitable educational outcomes" (p.95). Martinez's comments indicate the weak socialisation of new teachers in the Australian context and as Remmington Smith (2007) points out "(q)uestions of expertise, experience and power can complicate what appears to be straightforward expert—novice interaction". (p. 88)

Conclusion

This small scale study, demonstrates how a single school, through few additional resources and a moral commitment to critical professional activism and a partnership priority, can untangle factors that characterise how the profession constructs induction and mentoring. The literature of induction and mentoring foregrounds the emotional impact of the early years of teaching. As Liston et al. 2006, contend, often learning the theory is not enough for beginning teachers. Beaumont school has provided aspects of the integrated culture of professionalisation that *The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers*, led by Suzanne Moore– Johnson and colleagues (2004) affirm is a feature of successful schools for beginning teachers. Put plainly, these schools are those led and organised as places for teacher and student learning.

In a partnership developing and researching what happens has a mutual benefit. Practitioner research has many forms. Action research, participatory, self study, visual methods and narrative approaches make up the literature and get noticed because under these conditions " the boundaries between research and practice often blur, creating unique opportunities for reflection and improvements of the practice of teacher education " (Borko, Liston & Whitcomb, 2007, p.5).

In this inquiry a collaborative and practitioner research stance has been enacted. The conceptual framework of this research designed through the "discipline of noticing " (Mason, 2002) affirms the situated nature of teaching and early career socialization though practices such as induction and mentoring. Experiences where the social actors are moved to make sense of their socio cultural contexts and representations of both successes and flaws in policy enactment and theory building are integral to professionalisation. Research in the field of induction and mentoring with a few exceptions is theoretically impoverished and is dominated by what Law describes as "commonsense realism" (2005, p.597) and "methodological cleanliness" (p. 595). The "discipline of noticing" has supported us to enact an activist rather than a reproductive stance to early career professionalization and professional learning. The questions that Bobby and Denni ask of their work are invaluable, but not final. The importance and role of developing theories and philosophies for teaching through joint inquiry and reflection, recalling John Dewey (1904/1964) affirm in Mason's words the foregrounding of noticing as a method of research that "applies to practitioners developing their own expertise" (2002, p.202). Whilst the blurring of understanding of mentoring and induction is commonplace, as illustrated in the Beaumont narrative, what matters are embodied practitioner actions – " claims ", " products " and " validation "; whether future action is " informed " and " something they can test out in their own experience " (Mason, 2002, p.186), and thereby our mutual development. The troubling of what constitutes the professional knowledge of mentoring and induction that gets noticed, rather than lost, requires more not less action. In this small scale study we have reached for a critical space where we have been able to consider more sharply issues of professional identity and early career socialisation. Intersubjective research texts that incorporate co–experience, extensive and extended dialogue alters selves and others along the way. Therein lie the benefits of school-university partnerships and the significance of generating method for small scale–close up research in teacher education.

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