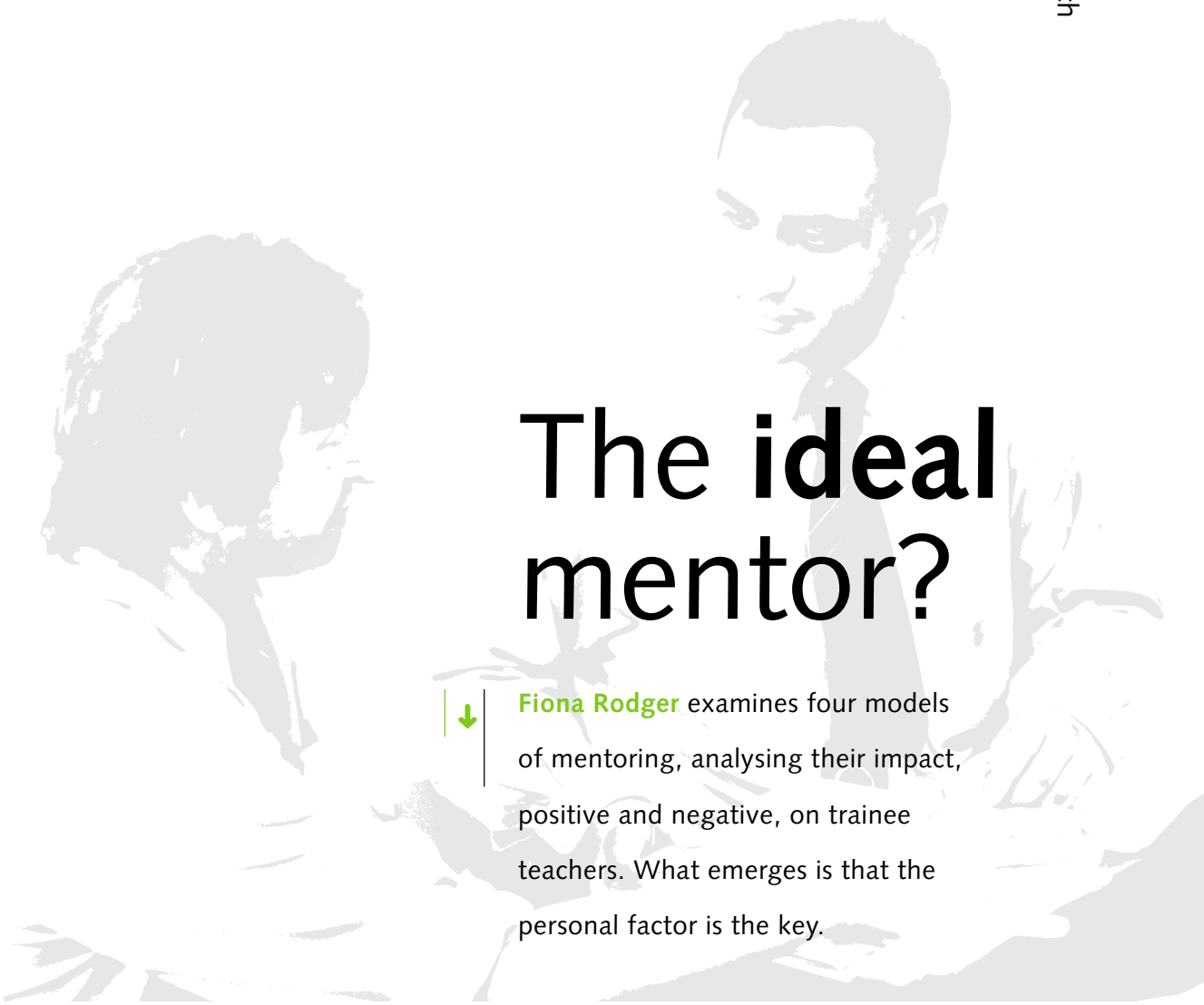

The **ideal** mentor?

Fiona Rodger examines four models of mentoring, analysing their impact, positive and negative, on trainee teachers. What emerges is that the personal factor is the key.

The government drive of the 1980s and 1990s making teacher education more school-based has gained momentum. Demand for experienced teachers to mentor trainee teachers through employment, based routes or full-time courses is growing. The mentoring revolution is here to stay. Whilst the role of mentor combines professional and personal skills, mentors are not specially selected – teachers adopt the role when allocated a trainee. Despite training courses, the quality of mentoring varies widely.

In this article four models of mentoring are examined. These models emerged from observations in schools together with discussions with trainee teachers and mentors. Findings from these observations and discussions are presented. It is argued that whilst the development and assessment of teaching skills and competences is key, the most important factor emerging is the importance of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Personal qualities and the acknowledgement that each individual is unique are of paramount importance to trainee teachers and their professional development. The impact of mentoring styles, positive and negative, is examined and I argue that becoming a mentor should be one of choice and not merely one of availability.

High expectations of the mentor

'Trainee teachers should be sent into the classroom to learn to teach, to develop the characteristics of the good teacher and use

common sense and acquire confidence.'
(Lawlor, 1990, p.21)

This extract from Lawlor echoes how teacher education has changed and developed significantly over the last century. Government policy means there has been a substantial shift from predominantly university/college-based training to school-based training. Significant numbers of experienced teachers are now required and expected to be mentors – an important, responsible and, at times, challenging role. Research shows the role combines an array of professional and personal skills and 'comes on top of all other responsibilities' (Watkins, 2000, p.67). My research for this article indicates it is a multi-faceted, multi-personality role. Mentors are required to demonstrate effective pedagogical practice to facilitate pupils' learning, together with skills of observation, giving constructive criticism, setting targets and encouraging trainee teachers to be creative and reflective in their teaching. Strong interpersonal skills of listening, communication, the ability to look beyond the lesson at the person and their capabilities and potential are also highlighted. The trainee teacher's experience of mentoring has considerable impact on how they develop during what is a busy, difficult and emotionally turbulent year. During visits to, and conversations with, mentors and trainee teachers, a variety of styles, referred to as models, emerged and so I set out to examine these models and establish if one was to be recommended.

Since the mentoring revolution of the 1990s there has been an explosion in the literature on the subject. Much covers the theoretical, generic issues of mentoring. Key writers in the field, for example Arthur, Davison and Moss (1997), examine the role closely in terms of the practical and personal skills required, observing two models – Pragmatic and Discursive. Maynard and Furlong (1995), in a similar vein, describe Competency and Reflective models. More practically, Bubb (2005) agrees mentoring is key and should continue in the early stages of a teacher's career whilst Lopez-Real and Kwan (2005) examine mentors' own personal professional development underpinning the concept of lifelong learning. Merrill and Child (2005) offer some solutions to problems mentors may encounter on a daily basis and Rodger (2005) explores the effectiveness of different mentoring models. The work of American writers, Boreen, Niday and Johnson (2003) highlights similar problems the world over. They argue there is no definitive model, feeling strongly that '... many problems experienced by trainee or beginning teachers could be avoided with a more careful matching of mentors to new teachers' (Boreen et al. p.7). As an innovative approach worth considering in the UK it would appear to be good in theory but difficult to manage in practice. Nevertheless, their idea is supported by this research.

Background to the research

Education, we are continually told, is a priority for the government. The standard of classroom teaching is key, suggesting the education and training of teachers is crucial in achieving this. Boreen et al. (2000) agree. They say that 'when a new teacher becomes effective in the classroom, the potential for trainee learning increases.' Teacher education is a partnership between universities and schools where the mentor's role is extremely important. Good mentoring results in an effective teacher creating excellent learning opportunities for school pupils. thus achieving the government aim of high quality education. The responsibility of mentoring is great and often underestimated and mentors 'will be asked to play the dual roles of host and colleague. If you are working with a trainee teacher, you will need to balance 'parenting' your charge with being a 'sibling to the University supervisor.' (Boreen et al. 2000: p.4). Indeed the responsibilities can be seen as even wider and potentially daunting, for mentoring has a more immediate impact on school pupils and also impacts on other stakeholders such as parents, the school, surrounding community, employers and further and higher Education institutions.

Trainee teachers in England and Wales spend 120 days in schools when studying for a Post Graduate

Certificate of Education (PGCE). During that time they have practical teaching experience in two contrasting schools. Those opting for the Graduate Teacher Programme are employed by a school learning 'on the job' whilst being supported by a mentor. They are an interesting and varied group coming from a variety of ages, spanning 22 to 55, and contrasting backgrounds. A significant number come into teaching from other careers, many with managerial and mentoring experience and may be familiar with the qualities required to mentor effectively.

How the research was carried out

Firstly, a focus group met at the end of the 2005 PGCE year at the Institute of Education in London, bringing together a cross-section of trainee teachers to discuss different experiences. The group consisted of six men and six women from a variety of ages, ethnicity and previous careers. The discussion was recorded and transcribed. On examining these transcriptions, a number of themes emerged. It became clear some trainees had very positive experiences where, in an open and supportive environment, they felt able to build on their learning and were encouraged to be creative. Others felt their learning was hindered by being discouraged to step outside the safety box of an established department with fixed ideas of teaching and learning.

> "Good mentoring results in an effective teacher creating excellent learning opportunities for school pupils"

Secondly, it was important to extend this small-scale research and hear the views of mentors. Did these match up with the trainees' observations? Two experienced mentors agreed to be interviewed at the end of the PGCE year. These interviews were recorded and transcribed and subsequent analysis showed they approached the role in entirely different ways. Both were passionate mentors agreeing that the acquisition of teaching skills and competencies was key. However, their different personalities and personal experiences meant they adopted quite different approaches.

Finally, at a training session, 25 new and experienced mentors completed questionnaires. They were asked how they viewed the role. They were also asked to reflect on their own experiences of being mentored and how it shaped the way they mentored or intended to mentor. Again, the main theme of 'instructing' trainees in skills and competencies emerged; however, the effect of the personal relationship on trainees' professional development came through strongly, and it is to these themes, together with the trainees' observations, that I will now turn.

What I discovered

The research indicates that mentors feel the most important attribute is one of teaching trainees skills and competencies. Having reflected on their own practice, they see their main role as working on lesson planning, preparing schemes of work, creating resources, offering strategies for classroom management, observing lessons and offering feedback. This would tie in with Arthur et al.'s Pragmatic Model (1995) where mentors 'saw their teaching role as transmitting knowledge about what practice works and what does not. They described their assessment function as monitoring the development of trainee teachers' skills or competences'. Intriguingly it seems there was little acknowledgement of underpinning these skills with educational theories examining how pupils learn, thus limiting trainees' learning.

Trainee teachers' conceptions differ significantly. Their needs suggest that the personal skills of the mentor are more important. When asked about the qualities they looked for, what emerged was a very different list, which including critical friend, supportive confidante, maternal colleague, compassionate and understanding, protector and listener – all with a sense of humour! They feel their competency in the classroom was enhanced when learning in a supportive environment where

individuality was acknowledged.

In contrast, the suggestion that mentoring could be approached in different ways given the trainee teacher's experience, skills, strengths and personality came as a surprise to some mentors. 'Do people do it differently – how?' was the response from one very experienced mentor.

Let us look at the models emerging from the data analysis. Each model is described and supported by quotes from mentors and/or trainees. The first three demonstrate trainee learning taking place but in very different ways. The fourth model is completely negative and no trainees should face this experience. It is counterproductive and may result in trainees leaving the course.

Positive and constructive models

Open and Flexible

Mentors who could be located in this model take a maternal-like, supportive, but 'hands-off' approach. Trainees are encouraged to examine past learning experiences in order to move their learning on. New learning is underpinned with a knowledge and understanding of previous learning. Thus mentors:

- engage the trainee in discussion at the beginning of the placement, establishing previous experience, personality, hopes for the placement and level of support required
- assist with schemes of work, lesson planning and classroom management
- are open to innovative ideas, happy for trainees to be creative in the classroom
- never feel threatened by a strong trainee – at times feeling their own teaching is enhanced by new ideas
- operate an 'open door' policy and see the trainee as an equal colleague

This model can be detected in the response by one mentor, Katy, who said:

I have never felt threatened by a student who could do a better job than me – we all know that we can teach an excellent lesson one week and teach a dreadful lesson the following week. I might feel threatened if a student was refusing to take advice.

and:

We are all colleagues together ...I should be the one person they feel they can say anything to and they won't feel embarrassed.

Mentors here are able to adopt a more managerial, less maternal style if a trainee teacher is experiencing difficulties. One significant difference emerges: mentors find they are more managerial with younger trainees who seem to prefer the structured transmission approach (Arthur et al. 1997) whereas older trainees, coming from a career with management experience were happy to engage in the co-construction approach of discussion and building on past experiences (Watkins 2005). Mentors here acknowledged the importance of sharing teaching skills and positively encouraged trainees to experiment and reflect on their own practice in order to enhance their learning.

Closed and inflexible

In this model, mentors are keen for trainees to learn, although they adopt a rigid, pedantic style. Mentoring is embedded in the transmitting knowledge approach. So typically mentors:

- establish a set of rules regardless of the experience, strengths and personality of the trainee
- do not acknowledge individuality or the learning and experiences gained in the first placement – they always start from the same point
- feel it is important for trainees to follow instructions and 'do the right things'
- aim to have all the boxes ticked
- discourage new and innovative ideas

This model can be detected in Trevor's rather harsh view of the process. He says:

There is a breaking in process – they are here for a purpose and whether they like it or not they have to bite their lip, swallow their spit, shut up and get on with it.

Trevor also feels training institutions are overprotective of the trainees:

I sometimes feel that we mollycoddle the students – if some of the breaking in was done at the university then I wouldn't have to spend so much time doing it.

James found this rigid approach difficult:

The big shock for me was a mentor who was very much a meat and two veg mentor – everything was done by the book.

Ranjit, also felt frustrated by this approach and was surprised when her mentor, Simon, said:

Right, this week, week 18 we're going to do this or *we can't do it this week because of so and so, it'll be rearranged.*

Trainees become frustrated doing what they feel is necessary just to get through the placement. Jane said:

She very much constricted the way I was allowed to teach them or the things I was allowed to do with them.

and Adam felt:

Very early on he pushes out any sort of notion that you're going to try and add your own personality or creativity into lessons – I found that quite crushing. He took no truck with an alternative view so I thought I need to get through this placement so I will adopt his style.

A typical view echoed by Adam is that some teachers feel they have to pick up the pieces when the trainee leaves the placement.

Well you could do that but don't forget that if it goes wrong we have to – when you're gone – pick up the pieces.

This attitude undermined trainees' confidence.

Mentors located here have one way – their way – the 'one size fits all' approach. This is about training a teacher in a set of competencies and not about developing them as confident individuals or reflective and innovative practitioners (Maynard and Furlong 1995). The needs of the system are paramount – not the needs of the trainee. Some mentors thought they were flexible in their approach; however, there was a mismatch between what they thought they did and what they actually did. On further analysis of the data, they seem prepared to listen to ideas presented to them but say 'good idea but not in this school with these pupils'. They insist what they believe to be the correct way for the school is followed. Trainees' ideas are only taken into account if they fit in with the department plan. James describes this model as a 'meat and two veg' approach without the 'delicate mixture of flavours'. All notions of bringing creativity and innovation to the classroom are pushed aside. Mentoring is done by the book.

Another feature in this model is that no account is taken of experience gained in the first placement. Frustratingly, trainees find themselves starting at the beginning again when their learning should be a continuum. Some felt they took several steps back. Mentors are provided with documentation from the first placement describing trainee progress to date. This should enable them to gauge the continuation

point for the trainee's learning. One trainee vented her frustration with this approach when she arrived at her second placement. Christine said:

What has happened here? It was quite demoralising because I know what I am capable of and I thought where has it all gone?

Trainees learned competencies and skills but were not encouraged to build on previous learning.

Open, flexible and challenging

Trainees described mentors located in this model as inspirational. They are effective teachers, able to reflect on their own practice for the benefits of the trainees. Keen for trainees to learn, they engage them in the construction model of learning. They encourage analysis of previous learning, enabling understanding of the learning process. Trainees are encouraged to use this understanding to build effectively on the learning and experiences of their pupils. These mentors are effective, reflective practitioners who, in addition to the features of the Open and Flexible models:

- are confident enough to adopt a 'follow my example approach
- aim to stretch and challenge trainees by encouraging innovation and creativity

Some idolized their mentor. Sayeda said:

What the mentor did was provide a fairly inspirational sort of example.

In this model, the mentors were more hands on than the first model. They were keen to challenge the trainees and also say, 'This is good – but what about ...' offering ideas to move the trainee forward. Sayeda confirmed this by saying:

I just felt I was being challenged and pushed and that I was getting the support I needed.

These mentors were positive role models, critical friends, constructive in their criticism and were able to move the trainees' learning on, enabling substantial progress. Trainees here felt comfortable trying out new ideas, safe in the knowledge if it went wrong a 'learn from this experience' approach would be adopted rather than a reprimand. Here the learning was a positive experience. Trainees were encouraged to look beyond skills and competencies training to understand the educational theories underpinning their learning and subsequently their pupils' learning.

Negative and destructive model:
Closed, inflexible and negative

This model is seen as destructive in its approach and learning is severely restricted. Indeed many trainees felt like giving up and moving on. The main characteristics here are:

- no constructive criticism – only negative
- mentors appear to be unhelpful and critical

They sometimes resent the resent the presence of a trainee, while at other times use the trainee as an extra member of staff.

- Trainees feel demotivated.
- Mentors are inconsistent in their feedback with negative language being dominant.

Ruth said:

He wouldn't give me any constructive criticism or feedback on any of my lessons – it was quite demotivating when all he is saying is this needs improving and that needs improving, this was bad, this was bad,

this was bad. It wasn't very helpful that it wasn't constructive criticism, just criticism. I came here really positive and to put it bluntly I felt a bit battered by the time I had finished my first placement.

She continues:

Well hang on a minute – I am going to think about that lesson that has been completely ripped apart. It wasn't all bad but often you had to go to yourself for that and that is not always easy.

There is a feeling from the research that mentors in this model feel threatened by their trainees and in turn are unhelpful, critical, demotivating and often conflicting in their feedback – oral feedback at times being different from written feedback. Often trainees felt negative about themselves and their teaching. As a result trainees lost confidence.

> **"'Do people do it differently – how?'** was the response from one very experienced mentor"

The feeling from some in the focus group was:

Maybe it's a long time since they've been in our position. They should have some coaching on how you communicate to a trainee in an effective way. Some approached it with a blunt sledgehammer.

They left the practice feeling learning had been restricted and were starting their second placement at a disadvantage, with much to cover in terms of confidence building and skills development in order to complete the course. This approach fortunately was not dominant in the discussions, but it was happening more often than trainees and initial teacher trainers would like.

Reflections arising from the equiry

'Blunt sledgehammer, bit battered, completely ripped apart, quite crushing, demoralizing' – powerful, negative descriptions of a mentoring experience. If we are to agree with Lawlor's recommendation that 'trainee teachers should be sent into the classroom to learn to teach' (op cit) then the experience should be a positive learning experience. Why do mentors adopt a certain style? Let us explore the findings and the trainees' observations.

Learning from past experience

Mentors have a choice in the way they mentor and there is no ideal model – it is a combination of skills and personality. Mentors themselves were surprised to learn the role was approached in different ways and, interestingly, the majority of mentors acknowledged their style was as a direct result of their own mentoring experiences. Katy adopted the Open and Flexible model by reflecting on and learning from her own negative experience in the workplace:

I know myself from when I've gone to visit pupils on work experience, I always feel very apprehensive walking into the work place so generally I am very maternalistic and supportive.

Trevor, however, adopted the Closed and Inflexible model, even though he had an awareness it was not the best way, but he seemed unable to look at other options:

I worked in private industry for 15 years before going into teaching. If you did well you might get some praise but if you did badly you had your backside kicked. It made me work hard but inside I was just groaning and I was doing it because basically I was in fear of losing my job. That is why I mentor in a certain way – because of my past experiences in my previous job in the city and things that happened to me there.

Trainee teacher Jayesh observed:

I had a mentor who was quite precise. I think that was a big reflection on how he himself went through the mentoring process.

These observations help us to understand why these models are used. It was encouraging to note mentors were beginning to reflect on their own experiences, learn from them and were becoming more aware of the different models and were eager to explore. By contrast mentors in the Closed, Inflexible and Negative Model seemed not to have learned from their experiences and seemed unaware of the devastating effect they had on trainee teachers

and their view of the profession. It would be interesting to probe this in further research.

Learning from the wider school community

Mentors need to understand that they do not have the monopoly on teacher development. The school as a learning community offers a wide, rich context for trainees to extend their knowledge and understanding of the education process. Although being mentored plays a large part in their learning, the trainees were able to acknowledge the other contributing factors in their development:

The mentor who thinks they are the only source of the learning is suffering self-delusion. Every trainee teacher lives in a web of relations.

Trainees were fully aware their learning came from a 'web of relations', for example tutors, peers, pupils, friends and relations. This awareness was encouraging to those having negative experiences.

Regression in the second placement!

A most disturbing theme to emerge was how much trainees felt they regressed at the beginning of placement two. The logistics of placing trainees is not easy. It is intended they experience two contrasting schools, however this depends on location, travelling time and school availability. This also means having the experience of two mentoring approaches. Experiencing the Open, Flexible and Challenging model in both placements would be ideal, but what about the trainees who experienced the Closed and Inflexible Model in placement two where previous learning was not acknowledged? These people felt they took a backward step. They were anxious to have previous learning acknowledged and to build on that learning, and clearly some mentoring approaches did not allow for this. For a trainee having the opposite experience, their confidence grew.

Personal and professional qualities

A number of trainees thought there was a good balance between the professional and personal side of the mentor. They were very keen to have a mentor with strong professional qualities and good teaching skills but it was always apparent that they valued a supportive personality more. Peter obtained a post in his first placement school. It became clear from the discussion he had experienced the Open, Flexible and Challenging Model in both placements. When asked about the personal side of the mentor versus the professional side he observed:

A good mixture – both sides kept it more professional in the early stages. Both placements changed – at school A when I took up a job offer – I became a long term colleague in the waiting. In school B I waited until after my placement to have the mentor home for dinner!

In summing up his experience of mentoring he said:

A superb resource which helped put order, structure and learning into sometimes confusing, difficult and disappointing situations.

I would argue all trainees should be able to say this at the end of their training period but how can this be achieved?

Some recommendations

My research points to three ways forward:

Professional development of mentors

Watkins (2003) suggests that 'professional development opportunities for school colleagues undertaking mentoring of beginner teachers seems to have decreased.' Does this mean that mentors are involved in a 'sink or swim' experience'? In my experience, professional development for mentors is increasing and is available in different forms. There are courses for mentors to attend and my research has helped me understand the need to shift the focus of these courses. Skills and competencies are required to be assessed resulting in an effective teacher, but in order to develop a teacher able to see education in a wider context, the focus must be on the mentor having greater understanding of their role as a skilled practitioner, coupled with personal skills which create a positive learning experience for their trainees. It is also important that mentors understand the process is a continuum and trainees should never feel the

backward step in placement two.

'Developing as a Secondary School Mentor: A Case Study Approach for Trainee Mentors and their Tutors' by Stephen Merrill and Alan Child will be a useful resource and is reviewed in this issue of *Professional Development Today*. Mentors are also offered the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and gain certification for this valuable, often underestimated role. The Institute of Education offers a qualification – The Professional Diploma in Learning and Teaching. This qualification consists of a number of modules – one module being, *'Mentoring: Supporting Colleagues' Learning'* (Brooks and Rodger 2003).

Mentors recognising different approaches

This research has shown that there is no 'one size fits all' in the mentoring field. It is important to acknowledge that we are all different and unique and therefore will be different and unique as teachers. What model will work best is the one underpinned by a secure personal relationship between the mentor and the trainee – one which is supportive and where aims and objectives have been agreed. There is no doubt that the Negative Model needs to be eradicated as it is simply counter productive. It seemed trainees progressed more if the mentoring was supportive and criticism was helpful and constructive and they were treated as equals and not as unwelcome guests.

Selecting the correct person for the job

Boreen et al.'s philosophy of carefully matching mentors to the trainee teachers is an admirable one but very difficult to put into practice. However, if all mentors were to receive the appropriate professional development then the systems would be in place for trainees to experience effective, supportive mentoring in any school they were placed in. Mentors should be teachers who understand the learning process involved in learning to teach and should be willing to invest the time and energy it requires. It is also important for them to remember and reflect on their own experience in order to shape the way they mentor. Communication skills were deemed to be very important and I would concur with Boreen et al's (2003) view that 'only teachers with appropriate mentoring skills should be allowed to act as mentors.'

Conclusion

There is no question that mentoring plays a crucial role in teacher education but is often given little time or remuneration. So it would be beneficial if headteachers were to recognise the importance of this role by releasing mentors to attend training or indeed encourage training to take place in the school. If mentoring was more recognised for its importance in the development of our teachers and consequently the learning of our pupils, then perhaps teachers with the necessary skills and personalities would be the ones who would offer to do it. Although matching up people is a challenge, it would be a step in the right direction if the correct people were appointed to be mentors.

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