

Factors Influencing Mentor and Student Teacher Relationships During Placement Experiences

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Abstract

This article discusses findings from research concerning the expectations and perceptions of mentor teachers and student teachers (mentees), and how communication may affect this mentor-mentee relationship. The research points to the mentor-mentee relationships as pivotal in the development of student teachers. Findings show that expectations and perceptions of the roles require clarity from both mentor teacher and student teacher perspectives, and with more explicit communication there is an increased likelihood of building positive relationships. It is crucial that communication occurs from the beginning of the mentor-mentee relationship. The research examined also identified significant differences in the messages being communicated between the partners in the mentor-mentee relationship when student teachers are mentored in pairs, as opposed to one on one mentoring. The change in dynamics with paired placements may also lead to a more teaching focussed experience with reduced pressure on the individual student teacher.

Keywords: Mentor, Mentee, Relationship, Expectation, Communication, Positive, Student Teacher, Paired, Placement



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Introduction

The explicitness of mentoring interactions between the mentor teacher and student teacher will have a positive impact on the teacher-learning conversations for the student, and will make a difference to the overall placement experience ([Margolis, 2007](#)). The mentor-student teacher relationship is a crucial cog in the machine of school education. Outside of schools or education training provider programs, factors pertaining to mentor and student teacher relationship during student teacher placement are for the most part, a mystery. Feiman-Nemser (as cited in [Butler & Cuenca, 2012](#)) explained that this formal arrangement has unique dynamics, such as the selection of mentor teachers based on the notion that any teacher can successfully teach student teachers. Whilst examining literature about mentor-student teacher relationships, the search mostly yielded articles based on studies from outside of New Zealand. Journal articles containing relevant information to the topic of mentor-student teacher relationships that were reviewed, based their research methodologies almost exclusively in the qualitative realm. This literature review will explore the factors of expectations, building positive relationships and paired placements within the context of mentor-student teacher relationships.

Communicating Expectations

Whether communicated explicitly, or not at all, expectations and perceptions of the placement experience of the student

teacher and their mentor is often the starting point of the mentor-student teacher relationship. Perceptions about teaching on the part of the student teacher at the beginning of placement can quickly clash with the realities of school life. [Baker and Milner \(2006\)](#) deliberate that some student teachers start placement with strong pre-conceived ideas about teaching and soon find that their ideals may differ from that of their mentor teachers and the realities of the classroom environment. This indicates that clear communication, notably from the mentor is vital at the beginning stage of the student teacher placement. Similarly, Izadina's research on the matching and clashing of perceptions and expectations of the mentoring relationship discusses that mentor teachers can establish a positive experience for the student teacher if they first inquire about the student teacher's perceptions and expectations, as it will better prepare them to deal with any possible relational strains during placement ([Izadinia, 2016](#)). In addition to this, mentor teachers should define the professional mentoring relationship and what expectations they have of the student teacher ([Izadinia, 2016](#)). This suggests that transparent communication about expectations at the beginning of the student teacher placement can set a healthy tone upon which to develop a professional relationship.

In discussing findings of the multi-case qualitative study of more than 200 Australian teachers from the *Mentor for Effective Teaching Program*, [Hudson \(2016\)](#) stated that 33 respondents wrote that articulating expectations from a mentor perspective would lead to the development of a professional relationship. This type of relationship would foster objectives, ideas and well-

defined parameters for student teachers to engage in their practice. Further to this, nine of those mentors stipulated that expectations must be articulated in an open two-way conversation as this gives an opportunity for the student teacher to state their own expectations. This then gives rise to collegial collaboration that aids the production of a positive professional relationship ([Hudson, 2016](#)). The difference as stated through these particular results shows that when expectations are openly discussed in a two-way dialogue between mentor and mentee, a positive relationship is founded on mutual understanding, leading to a shared partnership rather than a relationship derived from goal setting and distinct boundaries. An interesting contrast is noted by [Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop \(2010\)](#) in their study of 20 mentoring pairs in an Israeli teacher training program. They found that in more than 50% of the cases the pairing was mismatched, they reported that in these cases expectations between mentors and student teachers are seldom conveyed in an open manner. In these situations of non-explicit expectations, a positive beginning to the mentor-student teacher relationship may be hindered.

Communicating expectations seems to play a crucial part in creating an environment where student teachers can develop their craft. Research findings by [Sudzina, Giebelhaus & Coolican \(1997\)](#), regarding three student teacher failure cases highlighted the lack of communication in relation to expectations. In each instance, mentoring as a construct was never communicated. Instead there were assumptions from both the mentors and the student teachers that each would have an understanding of what to do and how to do it ([Sudzina, et al., 1997](#)). This type of assumption leaves too much to chance and rapidly increases the likelihood of negative issues occurring. In these failure cases, improved and ongoing communication would play an important part in clearly demarcating roles and solidifying the mentoring relationship between the mentor and student teacher ([Aderibigbe, 2013](#)).

This lack of communication leaves expectations unclear and there can be a number of factors as to why this type of situation eventuates. One such factor was posited by [Bradbury & Koballa \(2008\)](#) when they identified that sources of tension in the mentor-student teacher relationship may occur when unequal power resides with the mentor. This places the student teacher in a position whereby they may be reluctant to question or enquire on the practices of the mentor because of apprehension toward damaging the relationship or negatively influencing the mentor's evaluation of their placement progress. Situations such as this are the antithesis to a healthy rapport between the mentor and student teacher where both parties need to bring to light and clarify expectations and to nurture fruitful communication to build positive relationship ([Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Hudson, 2016](#)).

The research studies described make it clear that expectations, if expressed openly between mentors and student teachers, heavily increase the likelihood of building positive relationships. The inverse would also appear to be valid. However, it may be that most of the respondents in these types of studies that explore communicating of expectations in two-way conversations, perhaps voice their opinion more from an ideological standpoint rather than reality.

Building Positive Relationships

For student teacher placement to be deemed successful, one factor to consider is the positive relationship between mentor and the student teacher. [Hudson \(2016\)](#) discussed how mentors in his

multi-case study from the *Mentor for Effective Teaching Program* suggest that one way to begin building positive relationship between mentors and student teachers is to have a meeting arranged prior to the placement commencing. This would perhaps alleviate the pressure of the formal introduction to the respective school and create opportunity for more informal dialogue. This is a suggested idea from mentors, which perhaps would be useful for schools and teacher education providers to consider pursuing. Gaining feedback from all stakeholders involved in such a process would likely be simple to obtain.

Mentors from [Hudson's \(2016\)](#) study endorsed attributes of focused listening, showing a sense of humour, empathy and the ability to converse and ask questions as a two-way exchange of building positive relationships between mentors and student teachers. Further to this, mentors recommend that;

...they share experiences by divulging their pedagogical weaknesses with tangible solutions to mentees as a method of modelling open self-reflection and that as experienced teachers they are not infallible but rather on a continued learning journey about teaching, particularly in relation to individual classes and students. ([Hudson, 2016, p.41](#))

This shows the human side of mentors and student teachers and, according to [Hudson \(2016\)](#), would aid the building of trust and respect for the student teacher to advance teaching techniques. From a student teacher perspective, support as an important component of positive relationship was reported widely in a number of studies ([Izadinia, 2016; John & Gilchrist, 1999; Sudzina, et al., 1997](#)). Reports that detail an effective mentor identify characteristics such as: being able to listen well, notice and act intuitively to their student teacher, give supportive discourse to help raise confidence, and foster open conversation that then allows the student teacher to reflect ([John & Gilchrist, 1999](#)). This is similar to [Izadinia \(2016\)](#) where support, feedback and relationship were repeatedly reported as characteristics of positive mentoring; however, in this study these characteristics were significant to all respondents including mentors. Because people are complex, attitudinal and relational qualities such as support in a mentor-student teacher relationship can be deemed subjective. After all, what is support? How is it enacted? The research alludes it to be mainly conversational support.

Paired placement

The building of positive relationships in the mentor-student teacher setting is often referred to as a one to one situation. Research into pairing students with a mentor is emerging but does claim to be as successful. [Baker and Milner \(2006\)](#) studied mentors responses to paired student placements and they “..found that paired secondary student teacher candidates developed a more intense and effective relationship with their mentor than did student teachers that worked alone under the guidance of a mentor teacher” ([p.61, 2006](#)). They explained that this relationship had a powerful dynamic and that its base was founded more on pedagogy rather than on the individual ([Baker & Milner, 2006](#)). This would seem to remove pressure on the students' involved because as [Margolis \(2007\)](#) ascertains, the pressure on this mentor-student teacher relationship is massive, therefore some argue for collaborative placements.

Baker and Milner's (2006) qualitative study centered around four paired student teachers and five single student teachers placed with single mentors in a secondary school context. An intriguing result emerged whereby mentors working with the paired student teachers found the experience more complex and demanding but they supported this new style of mentoring. Perhaps somewhat unclear is what specifically was complex and demanding? It could be connected to student teachers spending more time discussing vital teaching issues but perhaps it is unwise to make that assumption. Baker and Milner (2006) identified that paired placements create a more effective way of preparing teachers but again, the quantification of this is uncertain. However, according to data from the study, paired student teachers learned more on their placements than single student teachers (Baker & Milner, 2006). Paired student teachers also reported feeling more positive about the placement than single student teachers (Baker & Milner, 2006). Whilst these results are interesting, the isolation of research using a small sample size does lend to outcomes leaning more toward the anecdotal. It would be useful for ongoing research into paired student teacher placement to continue, as it is potentially a positive step forward for initial teacher training that maintains professional relationships, whilst lowering the risks for personality issues that can sometimes hinder the mentor-student teacher process.

Margolis (2007) explored the impact of mentor teachers using specific pedagogies with their student teachers. He suggested that paired placements and placements involving multiple mentors and student teachers seemed to show encouraging signs in the formation of collaborative learning and the formation of a more teacher-learning centered environment. Margolis (2007) indicated that a more teacher focused, collaborative learning space developed due to the new dynamics of placement and with less emphasis on the one to one relationship, this was similar to the findings of Baker and Milner (2006). Margolis (2007) used the example of paired placements or placements involving multiple mentors that operate in education and other industries as reasoning for future research. The merits of paired placement could be explored with a focus on other industries and comparative data. Both single and paired placements will have advantages and disadvantages, but there are possible strengths that may emerge with future research using paired placements. One of these could be that student teachers and mentors would be better positioned to have more opportunity of gaining multiple perspectives.

Butler and Cuenca (2012) defined the mentor teacher as a social agent and that “socializing effect can have either a positive or negative effect on the student teacher’s educational views” (p.301, 2012). Even in a paired placement situation where one to one relational intensity may be lessened, the mentor still has a potentially large influence on student teachers in the shaping of teacher identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the mentor-student teacher relationship is complex and can have positive or negative influences on student teacher learning depending on various factors. Expectations between mentors and student teachers need to be well defined from the very beginning of placement to ensure the best possible building of a positive relationship that contains a supportive environment with on-going two-way communication. Paired student teacher placement trials could offer another way to train pre-service teachers and further research could prove beneficial.

Limitations of this literature review are that some of the qualitative research had small sample bases and none of the articles investigated were set in a New Zealand context.

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