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Passionate People - Positive Solutions: How tutors, mentors and teachers can find solutions that will raise trainee achievement from 'good' to 'outstanding'.

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Background

Research concerning the achievement data of a group of final year undergraduates trainee teachers revealed that there had been a significant drop in those receiving a grade 1 'outstanding' (Ofsted, 2009) for their final assessed school based placement, and an increase in trainees receiving a grade 2 'good', when compared with data from previous years. Many factors could contribute to this outcome, however, evaluative evidence suggested that school based colleagues' descriptive feedback to trainees did not necessarily 'match' with the awarded grade, suggesting that colleagues were reluctant to use the Ofsted (2009) terminology of 'outstanding'. This highlighted the need for a positive solution on how best all involved in the assessment and grading process of trainee teachers could make accurate judgments of achievement. As McCulloch and Fidler (1994) point out it is only when colleagues in schools and teacher training institutions work in a complimentary way that successful achievement can be guaranteed. This paper examines some possible positive solutions that may have a contributing effect to raising trainee achievement and reducing the barriers to mentors feeling they cannot grade a trainee as 'outstanding'.

Research Questions

Since the 1980s, school-based mentoring has played an increasingly key role in supporting initial teacher training, and within our institution, partnerships with schools form an integral role in supporting and developing trainee teachers to develop their pedagogical skills and understanding. The objectives that underpin this study focus on highlighting the importance of trainee support, the personalisation of their professional development and fostering greater dialogue and mentor understanding of grading a trainee 1 as 'outstanding'. The importance of the notions of constant dialogue, nurturing and guidance is raised by Schon (1991), and in this study, is centred on the notion of reflection upon practice/outcomes to change and refine attitudes, aptitudes and achievement.

Methods

Gilbert (1993) points out that there are three major ingredients in research: the construction of theory, data collection and the methods for gathering the data. Therefore, the focus of the study underpinning this paper adopted an action research approach. The 'theory' was that mentors were experiencing challenges awarding the Ofsted (2009) 'outstanding' grade to trainee teachers. Therefore, data from school based report forms, completed by mentors, were collated. These reports provided qualitative descriptive feedback on trainee achievement across a range of 'standards' (TDA, 2007), with accompanying summative grades. The gathering and analysis of the data demonstrated a pattern between 'outstanding' and 'good'. Further analysis was undertaken and scrutiny of the comments and targets set highlighted a lack of clarity between the qualitative descriptive feedback and the summative grade, where, for example, a trainee who had been graded 'good' received written feedback and targets typically associated with an 'outstanding' grade.

Frame

Research suggests that mentoring is an important and effective form of supporting the professional development of pre-service teachers, not least because it can provide the opportunity them teachers to access more experienced teachers who can act as guides, and counsellors (Henke, Chen, Geis and Knepper, 2000). There is a large body of literature associated with mentoring, and the notion of the 'good' mentor, however, of particular relevance to this paper is the notion that such mentors

provide mentees with learning opportunities which foster their professional development (Wang, 2001) and their teaching capacities (Tomlinson, 2001).   In our model of mentoring, however, there is arguably a tension for the mentors who, whilst fulfilling their roles as supporters, guides and counsellors are also responsible for assessing trainee school-based performance. And, whilst it is widely acknowledged in academic circles that assessment is a fundamental component of the teaching and learning processes, evidence from a number of studies suggests that, where such dual roles of mentors exist, this can be problematic (Williams and Prestage, 2002).

Research findings

The main findings of the study which underpin this paper, indicate that a majority of mentors were not awarding the grade of 'outstanding' to trainees, but appeared to be 'playing safe' and awarding a grade of 'good' where it clearly appeared, on the basis of the descriptive feedback, that the trainee was operating at a higher level. This was evident from the summative comments and targets for future development that were set for individual trainees by school based mentors. This analysis identified a 'need', and as a result had a direct impact upon the content and delivery of Mentor Training Development and Enhancement events; encouraging a greater emphasis on reflecting on the use of the grading criteria and target setting. In addition to this it created opportunities for school based staff to come together at identified sessions to work with university based staff to confer, debate, discuss and produce a set of descriptors that define 'outstanding' trainee practice.

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