



## ARTICLE

### **Mentoring in the North: New provision, new perspectives?**

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# Mentoring in the North: New provision, new perspectives?

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## Synopsis

*This paper offers a new perspective on early professional development in the one-year PGDE (Professional Graduate Diploma in Education) course, exploring the potential of threshold concepts (troublesome knowledge) in clarifying the process of learning to teach for both experienced and recently appointed university tutors, and their student teachers. The key mentoring role of tutors in inducting graduates from different disciplines into the values and indeterminacies of teaching and learning may be hampered by the current listing of 'benchmarks' of performance, which can sometimes encourage a mechanistic or even inauthentic approach to the assessment of school experience, particularly by inexperienced tutors. Here we explore different tutors' perceptions of an alternative framework, derived from the classroom experience of probationers, that focuses on breakthrough moments for beginning teachers.*

## Introduction

Mentoring is a capacious term capable of a range of applications. It is often used to describe the role of school-based 'supporters' that is a key part of the induction of beginning teachers in Scotland, set up as part of the McCrone settlement (SEED, 2001). We extend the term here, however, to include the practices of school experience supervision by university tutors on the PGDE year of initial teacher education prior to probation, and take it to mean the range of supportive professional advice that those in the early stages of new or complex work can derive from experienced and trusted colleagues. We are interested in exploring the tutor support needed by beginning teachers, particularly those on intensive single year PGDE courses, and in devising a useful terminology to describe and understand this, based upon the experiences and professional changes that such teachers may expect to undergo as they encounter a variety of 'thresholds' in the process of learning to teach.

The Scottish induction programme that follows the PGDE course now offers beginning teachers the continuity of one guaranteed probation year of paid employment that also provides some 30% of non-contact time to engage in a range of staff development activities. It provides a marked alternative to the variability that pertains elsewhere in the UK system (Draper, O'Brien, & Christie, 2004;

Menter, Smith, & Brisard, 2003 ). Regarded with interest by teacher educators in other parts of the United Kingdom, this new provision represents a major departure from the variable and disjointed experience of early professional development that had pertained previously in Scotland, leading to worrying rates of wastage during the early careers of teachers who had lacked the sustaining influence of a settled school community and consistent advice from experienced colleagues.

This induction must also affect perceptions of initial teacher education, with the need for a clearer emphasis on professional development over time and a shared understanding of the benchmark criteria that chart this development. Yet it is not yet clear how consistently this is happening, partly because of logistical factors. Scotland's teacher education context currently includes significantly increased intakes to PGDE courses in response to projected staffing needs, and the employment of new university tutors or 'associate' staff to cope with increased school experience supervision. Unfamiliar with their new role and assessment standards, they will naturally depend upon the necessary requirements of the benchmark statements of professional knowledge and skills in the Standard for Initial Teacher Education (SITE) documentation, and use these for both formative and summative purposes. Experienced tutors too are accustomed to using benchmark or competence-based descriptors in discussion of classroom performance with student teachers on school experience.

But does such a radical systemic change in teacher induction through PGDE and probation not also demand new understandings of professional and personal development, and if so, what might those be? Experience of tutoring on such intensive one-year courses suggests that professional and personal development coincide and sustain each other, although the pace of development varies in relation to student personality, insight and experience. That development continues into probation. This paper describes a project that set out to examine the shaping experiences of a group of beginning teachers during their probation year, and focused in part on the spectrum of professional self-understanding that such teachers receive, firstly from university tutors and subsequently from school-based mentoring arrangements provided by

local authorities during the probation year. We were interested to explore a new conceptual framework of 'thresholds' to match this change of provision from a one-year to a two-year mentored experience of learning to teach. In part, we were also concerned to avoid a 'performative' approach towards the new benchmarking of professional knowledge, skills and values (simply because these benchmarks figure in the SITE and course assessment documentation). For PGDE students, our experience suggested, benchmarks can remain deeply troubling. Even when they have 'achieved' them to the satisfaction of tutors and school colleagues, they do not know why or how.

Our project used the developing theory of *threshold concepts* (or 'troublesome knowledge') to illuminate the empirical data gained from beginning teachers. Such concepts are viewed in the literature as key conceptual gateways that lead to confident progress in professional knowledge and skills within different academic disciplines (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005; Perkins, 1999). The idea of thresholds originated in lecturers' puzzlement about the points, in various academic subjects, where even motivated and intelligent students can get 'stuck', until they can somehow make a conceptual breakthrough that transforms their understanding of the troublesome topic and integrates it with prior knowledge. Such troublesome thresholds are thought to be irreversible once crossed, and to lead to new and energised awareness of the analytical frameworks of a given subject. They have begun to be applied to student learning in economics, physics, computer programming and language learning, but not, so far, in teacher education.

We wanted to explore the intersections between such irreversible breakthrough moments discerned by beginning primary and secondary teachers (and their tutors) during their PGDE course, and by their professional mentors during the school session immediately following. These are two linked but distinctive transformative spaces for new teachers. We also wanted to examine those concepts through the professional contexts and social relationships in which troublesome knowledge emerges, and through the sorts of support which can engender and sustain, or else close down, a positive understanding of such transformative experience for beginning teachers.

Establishing an evidential basis for threshold concepts in teacher education initially involved focus groups of PGDE completing students, an electronic survey of their early probation experiences, and individual interviews with probationer teachers and school mentors over one year. (This was part of a larger project funded by the

Society for Educational Studies Major Award in 2005–06). Analysis of the transcripts of these interviews finally generated ten possible threshold concepts. These are italicised in Appendix A, and are used here to explore not only differences between faculty staff and beginning teachers with regard to priorities in professional mentoring, but different levels of understanding between experienced tutors and those more recently appointed to cope with significantly increasing student numbers and school assessment visits (Cove, 2006). Faculty tutors are key figures in helping PGDE students to replace or adapt their academic subject discourse by an engagement with professional discourse or values, and in leading them to understand and value their variable experiences of children learning.

We are interested here to see to what extent threshold concepts might be used to reconfigure mentoring exchanges in the PGDE curriculum, and possibly also to provide a conceptual continuity into the probation year, in which university staff presently have no locus. Do these breakthrough moments seem valid and authentic from professional colleagues' points of view? Do they seem to offer a means by which beginning teachers might negotiate the combination of a competency-model (based on benchmarks of professional knowledge and skills) and a values-model (based on professional commitment) that is currently used in the Scottish system of teacher induction? Further, do faculty tutors not only become more skilled over time in recognising and mentoring breakthrough moments in student teachers, but also begin to recognise transformative changes in their own practice?

## Methodology

We held separate focus group discussions with five experienced tutors (with a minimum of six years' experience in post) and with five newly seconded staff from schools or newly appointed lecturers (reaching the end of their first year in post).

These discussions lasted about 90 minutes, were semi-structured around the questions that were also used in the interviews with school mentors (clarifying how mentoring operated in their particular contexts, the breakthrough moments they had observed with beginning teachers, the relational aspects of mentoring, and so forth), and were taped and transcribed.

Some eight months later, we held a second meeting with the same staff in separate groups, although pressures of school visiting meant that numbers of participants were reduced to three experienced and four newer staff. The newer staff had now



experienced a further two periods of school visiting. By now, too, we had carried out, transcribed and analysed extended interviews with 12 of our 24 probationer group in six local authorities, and considered further responses from the electronic survey. We thus provided both tutor groups in advance of the second meeting with extended and exemplified concepts that had been developed from analysis of in-school interviews, as bullet-pointed in Appendix A. We were interested in the tutors' response to these. Discussions were again taped and transcribed, and were semi-structured around the following questions:

- Are any of these threshold concepts [TCs] particularly recognisable or resonant within the PGDE programme(s) on which you teach?
- Do certain TCs tend to happen at different stages of the one-year course?
- Are any of these TCs rarely encountered by pre-service tutors?
- Do these TCs bear any clear concordance with the SITE benchmark statements?
- How might these TCs help beginning teachers to progress through 'troublesome' areas and/or to develop a confident professional identity?
- How might the TCs help faculty tutors to mentor students through problematic places in the PGDE course?

These discussions were coded using the emergent TCs, in order to estimate the validity and relevance of these within the pre-service element of teacher formation, from the perspective of both experienced tutors and newer tutors, mainly still influenced by the school focus of their recent relevant experience. Selected quotations from each group were mapped on to the relevant extended threshold concepts. Although we encountered 'layering' of concepts or conversational cross-reference to a range of factors, nevertheless broad patterns of response emerged, and an interesting variety of focus, as well as an endorsement of the practical potential of this new framing of early teacher development.

### First focus group findings

Almost all the TCs were touched on, but to differing extents by experienced and new tutors. This difference was a matter of emphasis and of the number and clarity of responses around the threshold concepts, rather than a polarity of response. In TC1 (Appendix A) for example, which focuses on the classroom balance between teaching and learning, we found both sets of tutors echoing our probationer teachers' identification of breakthrough moments.

Differences in emphasis were seen, for example, in the responses of an experienced (Exp) tutor and a new or seconded tutor (New) to issues of learning signalled in TC1. In the first instance, it directly echoed the testimony of PGDE primary students on the transformative nature of their pre-5 school experience:

I think a lot of mine in Term 1 didn't really understand what learning was. They might have understood what teaching was, but they didn't actually understand what learning was, and I think going out into pre five...was a revelation. (Exp 1)

New tutors too recognised something of this conceptual shift, in the movement over time from student teachers' early mimicry of experienced teacher behaviours and towards a more productive focus on children's learning experiences:

They tend to perform, almost, to the children when they first come out, and what I find with your second or third visit, what you are really looking for, is that they are starting to facilitate more than just perform... (New 1)

But this area remained a troubling issue for many beginning teachers, and not all of them cross the threshold easily:

You know that they are intelligent [but] they literally will sit there and say to you, 'Nursery is a load of rubbish. All the kids are doing is playing in the sand, and [the staff] are just baby-sitting'...They are so socialised into a way of thinking that they are just not open. (Exp 2)

As tutors, we trust that further reflection and guidance from ourselves and school colleagues will help such 'stuck' students out of a position that will actively prevent them from moving forward in professional understanding and effectiveness. The experienced tutor above saw this partly as an issue of discourse: of being 'socialised into a way of thinking' by their previous degree studies. Yet in their new role, beginning tutors could also experience even more keenly than experienced colleagues this sort of impasse of contradictory discourses:

You have to sort of gauge in a sense who you have in front of you and how they want to learn, and what is going to be effective...what will work with one student just won't work with the next student. (New 2)

We will return to the issues of professional relationships and trust under TC8 below. One

source of this difficulty was that, in terms of pre-service teacher formation, new tutors tended primarily to see their role as giving up-to-date knowledge on curriculum and assessment frameworks, whereas more experienced tutors were more confident in seeing that, since these beginning teachers are also learners, similar conceptual issues and confusions can arise for adults undergoing the transformation of teacher education, and that TC2, which deals with how the same curriculum can be effectively taught in different ways, could apply to student teachers as much as to the children they are learning to teach. Experienced tutors applied this flexibility to their own students, and linked it firmly to classroom learning:

I would say for most in Term 1 they are thinking about their teaching, most of them. The more mature ones are maybe thinking about learning...Maybe by the end of Term 1 some of them will be changing the balance [towards learning]. (Exp 4)

The balance here between an insecure student teacher's focus on getting the content right ('teaching') and the more insightful beginner's breakthrough into a focus on children's learning was realised as a trajectory from Term 1 to Term 3, along which new teachers can proceed at different rates. This issue was returned to by both groups in our second set of interviews.

Experienced tutors noted that a breakthrough can often be related to classroom interaction, an issue which PGDE students about to begin their probation year had still regarded as troublesome: 'What's the magic phrase?' one male student had asked, meaning the effective teacherly way of talking that can immediately communicate and engage with children's minds. He had seen experienced teachers use this, but doubted whether he possessed, or could achieve, such professional skill with language to create ethos, atmosphere and positive working relationships in the classroom, the focus of TC3. Language and communication issues seem central to learning, as new tutors recognised early:

And they realise that learning is about, you know, interacting with the children, and I think it becomes more experienced-based learning for the child than them just delivering and talking at the children... (New 3)

Experienced tutors could see this threshold too as a part of developmental process, a key step that student teachers had to take to gain full impact on children's minds:

It's about valuing all the different constituents

they have, and out of that you generate an ethos that is productive and comfortable... (Exp 5)

This consideration leads naturally into the realisation of TC4, which focuses on the whole-school ethos and structures for behaviour management. Here experienced tutors noted the link between encouraging effective learning behaviour in children (through careful preparation and clarity of aims) and confident use of class management strategies, which can seem mysterious at the early stages of training:

They do change fairly rapidly once they do start to talk to older colleagues, they do start to read more...to investigate different types of motivation and so the issue becomes less hysterical in their minds and more grounded, more reflective again. (Exp 6)

Learning to mimic the approaches of experienced colleagues was recognised as being only an initial survival response, without a real breakthrough in understanding, which would often involve reading and reflection, as well as the mentoring guidance of others. To that extent, discipline issues too became part of the emphasis on reflection that many beginning teachers on the one-year PGDE course find really difficult to grasp in the midst of an experience which, at least initially, is fraught with physical, organisational and emotional problems to be solved: realising 'what makes reflection work' is the focus of TC5.

The view expressed above (Exp 6) on behaviour management was that of an experienced tutor. New tutors had relatively little to say explicitly about such behaviour issues, perhaps because this seemed relatively unproblematic to them with such recent classroom experience to draw upon. Yet the turn towards reflection, and the shaping principle of 'the reflective practitioner' that underpins much course documentation in teacher education and, indeed, the SITE documentation itself, was a problematic issue both for beginning teachers and for their new tutors, who sensed that they themselves had to move from information-giving 'on demand' towards a more reflective dialogue:

We are giving them so much information, and...they don't really know how to deal with it all, and...when someone actually makes them look at themselves as teachers, then they start to become involved in the reflective process of actually looking at themselves... (New 4)

The sources and documentation of such reflection caused initial problems, however, both for tutors (new and experienced) and for beginning teachers.

Written reflections in journals or lesson evaluations were viewed as problematic. Spoken dialogue was seen by some new tutors as somehow more authentic, and likely to lead to progress with a difficulty:

That's really the way you actually admit it...Writing it down, it's almost kind of...not attached to you personally. (New 5)

However, it was recognised by all tutors that progress in a reflective professionalism varies in relation to student personality or emotional maturity. There was early realisation by new tutors, too, that classroom experience and busy-ness can actually detract from useful mentoring, and of the key role of faculty staff in taking student reflection forward:

Teachers tend to have a lot of experience, but the ability to actually discuss that with the student, the learning that's underpinning the practicalities of what's going on, I don't think there is an awful lot of discussion goes on concerning that. (New 6)

Experienced tutors tended to sense more of the inadequacies of the current faculty procedure of immediate post-lesson discussion. Various alternatives were suggested:

In the future, could I have some kind of form that they could fill in after I go, so that they don't forget? That we give them some kind of focus[for reflection] that we could then talk about again when they come back in? (Exp 7)

Experienced tutors valued the interaction with beginning teachers beyond the 'assessment-led' school experience visits, as well as during them:

I really value the meetings that we have before and after the placement, as well as going out to talk to individual students, but...the emotional, the pastoral side of things could be consolidated more. (Exp 8)

This emphasis on the interactive nature of mentoring accords clearly with TC6, which focuses on coming to understand one's own role in the mentoring process. New tutors experienced difficulty in first engaging with this interactive dimension of mentoring:

I think initially you almost want to prove yourself, that you were chosen for the right reasons, and you almost become really over-helpful...and I think it's learning to step back and say, wait a minute, I can't do everything for the

students, they have got to learn from their own mistakes as well. (New 7)

In contrast, experienced tutors had generally moved to a more secure position of accepting and handling variability in student teachers' classroom performance:

I suppose the mentor grows along with the mentee, as it were, it is a kind of relationship and you are both growing together and responding to each other honestly...I have learned to sort of just stand back a bit and say: It can't all be my fault, you know. Exp 9)

Such aspects of mutual responsibility and the acceptance of imperfection were also school-based issues that had shaped our formulation of TC7, where 'professionalism' comes to be seen as attaining the confidence to make a considered choice about how the curriculum might most effectively be taught, realising that imperfection is part of the picture, that learning and teaching will often be successful only in part, but that 'failures' plus reflection can contribute to professional knowledge and growth.

There was also a realistic awareness among new tutors that beginning teachers had to develop the confidence to work independently:

They have got to become teachers of today and not teachers of the past...I think initially they do follow what they see perhaps...initially – and then it's having that confidence to say, 'No, I am going to try something different, I will be an individual and try that', but that does take a lot of courage. (New 8)

New tutors engaged more actively with this 'professionalism' TC than with any other, in terms of number and length of comments, possibly because of a sense of having to negotiate or make sense of the differing professional norms in their school and faculty roles. Some of their comments revealed a similar unease with jargon as the completing PGDE students in our first focus groups had expressed just prior to probation:

Different tutors in here interpret the benchmarks to mean different things, and I think that that's a major difficulty for students...the students then are given mixed messages, so maybe we need to be much clearer ourselves. (New 9)

Some experienced tutors showed less unease with the jargon of benchmarks during this first interview, but in the second interview their dissatisfaction with the system emerged more clearly: namely,



benchmark-related assessment sheets encourage an attitude of compliance and box-ticking among both tutors and students, where a more honest response would be less determined, more developmental (see Exp 16 below).

Experienced and new tutors clearly recognised the relational nature of teaching as a profession. The tutor acts as a link-person or translator between wider academic issues and classroom realities, sometimes modelling the partnership dimensions that are intrinsic to educational life:

School visits just make you see they are making connections or that they have not quite made the connection. You then have to build a wee bridge with them, and sometimes building the bridge doesn't work and you actually then have to go back and seek advice from more able colleagues and say, 'Look I've seen this, this isn't working, what else do you suggest?' (New 10)

This relational aspect of learning to teach was the focus of TC8 which recognises the social dimensions of professional life. Relationships with colleagues and pupils were clearly seen to matter:

It's almost like...a mission. The job isn't about holidays and the money. It is about their relationship with their pupils and their colleagues and how they can make that as effective as possible. (Exp 10)

New tutors recounted experiences of trying to counter negative professional relationships:

Sometimes people you are mentoring in school can be influenced by disgruntled members of staff; whereas here [in the faculty role] you can actually...have this belief in the education system and the things you are doing for the children, you can share that belief... (New 11)

New tutors encouraged or facilitated electronic networking, but were also wary of its potential to damage relationships:

You know, you can be contacted too easily and quite often...and also misinterpreted by email too...it's something that could be said quite innocently, it's taken in another way, and can cause a lot of trouble.  
(New 12)

New and seconded tutors, perhaps surprisingly, had less to say on the issue covered by TC9, which deals with the overlapping communities of home and school on children's learning. This may have been because they were themselves currently adjusting to

the realities of very differing communities of practice in faculty and in schools. Experienced tutors, on the other hand, had had more opportunity to see the wider picture, through having observed student teachers engage with wider issues of values and commitment:

They do become more critically reflective. They move away from everything being focused around themselves to...you know, what economic or societal influences are there on these children. (Exp 11)

Experienced tutors were also more able to express, or live with, the uncertainty and contradiction inherent in teacher development than the new tutors could, with their initial focus on providing immediate and correct answers to beginning teachers' problems. With experience of living with the tensions of learning to teach, and with the tentative nature of most learning, one tutor identified 'getting stuck' as being intrinsic to the process, both for the beginning teachers and for their tutor:

They do have a vision of what education is for and...how they want to be as a teacher. But they realise that teachers very often...can be perceived as quite authoritarian; whereas, on the other hand, they want to be sometimes very radical and creative and innovative, and they don't always get the chance, and they are not quite sure what the norm is that they should be following...And that is troublesome for them...But I don't know if I know what the answer is! (Exp 12)

Working through such tensions in the probation year gave rise to TC10 in most of the beginning teachers whose experiences we examined, but with our pre-service focus here we do not comment on this final energising sense of 'owning' or 'earning' a professional identity.

## Second focus group findings

The second focus group took place with (as far as possible) the same experienced and new tutors midway through the following session. Here the main issue was one of triangulation of the now extended ten TCs that had emerged from our probationer cohort's comments. The interviews were semi-structured around the same broad questions as before.

Both groups revealed similar areas of concern to those expressed in the first interviews, with the experienced tutors again emphasising progression in awareness of learning and the newer tutors

emphasising issues of professionalism. But there was to some extent a change in the dynamic of each group, possibly arising from missing group members, or from additional confidence that new tutors had gained over eight months and two further rounds of school experience mentoring. The new tutors seemed more alert and responsive to the potential of these TCs to help them make sense of their role. The more experienced tutors were also positive, but seemed more functional in their comments, seeing an immediate pragmatic advantage in the TCs' potential for making their work clearer and more authentic.

Both groups responded positively to the ten TCs as a recognisable, researched and usable formulation, and immediately suggested mentoring contexts in faculty or on school experience where they would help to create a coherence of effort in the mentoring of beginning teachers. They appeared to offer an accessible and grounded framework to enable the professional journey towards confident achievement of the benchmarks.

Elements of both chronology and hierarchy were thought to be involved, with one experienced tutor focusing on TCs 1, 2, 3 and 4 as crucial to PGDE development, with TC1 seen as vital in its focus on learning. Experienced tutors recounted cases of students who, because of effective mimicry of teacher behaviours in Terms 1 or 2, had initially appeared successful but then revealed a marked lack of progression when in Term 3 they were expected to take charge of the whole class for much of the day. For experienced tutors, TC1 and TC2 were looked for in Term 1 among the gifted students and by Term 3 in all or most students.

Broadly, the experienced tutors saw the 1-10 order of TCs as an order of importance for classroom effectiveness, although some of them felt that TC5's focus on reflection was somehow slightly tangential to other more salient classroom issues. (TCs appeared in that order, in fact, because we had tried to follow the SITE benchmark sequence from professional knowledge through professional skills towards professional values and commitment, and reflection actually appears in the second section, Professional Skills and Abilities.) Perhaps this reservation regarding reflection was just that it is evidently more difficult for tutors to pin down or to document confidently.

To some extent, the TCs may be akin to Berliner's (1994) sequence of teacher development stages from novice to expert, in that they offer beginning teachers a formative pre-taste of future progression, a metacognitive overview of what being a good teacher will be. Reflective practice within that

progression will vary according to the context of teachers' working lives, ongoing support, emotional maturity and openness to taking developmental advice.

The TCs were considered by all tutors to be a positive device for ensuring consistency of assessment and of the mentoring experience, while remaining responsive and flexible enough to deal with the vagaries of any individual student's performance or attitude. The benchmarks currently used to guide mentoring feedback on school placement, as well as to evidence assessment, provide only un-exemplified statements of performance, whereas the additional three bullet points for each TC in our extended framework were felt to create developmental pathways and an opportunity for reflective discussion between tutor and students, or mentor and mentees. The fact that these had emerged from the actual words and experiences of beginning teachers, rather than from 'above', was thought to be particularly useful in encouraging student teacher reflection. For new tutors, the bullet point exemplars were thought to represent a sort of layering of issues implicit within a given threshold, and to that extent could provide a useful sense of direction to the sometimes fraught discussion with failing students.

Some experienced tutors admitted dissatisfaction with their current benchmark-led assessment:

I think we're being unrealistic with the number of the benchmarks and the fact that they're all lumped together, and there's a suggestion that the students should be able to do all of them all at once...They can't...It's a pretence actually. (Exp 16)

The TCs offered a way forward in this troublesome area.

Staff development implications also emerged strongly, with the potential of TCs to act as induction material for new tutors in professional discussion with their own mentors (if such exist) within faculty. As a checklist of issues, TCs allow tutors newly arrived from their school context to reflect on key issues of their own prior experience and to reshape these fairly quickly into a form that clearly matches the SITE benchmarks in its progression and clustering of topics, but does so at a level that encourages reflection and discussion. If the progression of students teachers is from a focus on the how of teaching to the why of learning and community (as one of the experienced tutors suggested) then the TCs certainly appeared to be helpful both to beginners (whether teachers or tutors) and to their mentors.



### Issues emerging

These focus group discussions both triangulated the threshold concepts that had emerged from our probationer data, and tentatively suggested that there may well be threshold concepts that also operate in learning to mentor beginning teachers. These need to be the focus of further study, but appear to emerge here in the context of placing pupil learning before teacher performance; of being 'tough' and clear on areas for improvement (rather than being merely supportive and enthusiastic); of appreciating the need to 'stand back' to let student teachers take responsibility for their own professional progress; and of representing 'big picture' issues of professional reflectiveness, through a considered understanding of the norms and needs of all participants within the community networks of schools and classrooms.

Three issues are particularly thought-provoking with regard to current practices within faculty elements of PGDE courses:

1. There is variability and uncertainty among both new and experienced tutors with regard to mentoring on school experience, to the benchmark standards, and to the most effective procedures to be followed. This suggests the need for a more professionally-focused cross-faculty approach to mentoring at the level of theory (while not losing the pastoral dimension which is emphasised above by all tutors). This would to some extent counter the 'de-professionalising' of teaching and the trend towards performativity that has affected faculties as well as schools (Ball, 2003; Bottery & Wright, 2000).
2. There is concern among some tutors about the efficacy of present opportunities for 'reflection'. While the post-lesson discussion does enable timely feedback on observed classroom events, student anxiety or tiredness may prevent truly effective reflection. Some immediate (but also intermediate) feedback format, with a follow-up meeting once both mentor and mentee have had time to reflect further, seemed better.

In teacher education currently, reflective and experiential learning are too easily re-worked within discourses that emphasise 'employability' (Moon, 2002). There is a tendency evident in some 'learn to teach' texts to employ a utilitarian and over-generalised use of the term 'reflection', 'reflective practice' and 'reflective practitioner' (McGonigal,

Hulme, & McDonald, 2007). The principal references to Schon (1983) are rarely developed to consider different forms or quality of reflection, and university tutors should be working to counter such thinning of the term in interactions with student teachers.

3. There appeared to be threshold concepts, or at least troublesome ones, for mentors in teacher education. These clustered round issues of reflection and reflectiveness; the balance of directive over-teaching and more tentative encouragement of professional autonomy; and the discovery of the proper balance between tutor sensitivity towards the emotional challenge of teacher formation (with humane support of beginning teachers, which can model future teacher-pupil relationships) and the need for honesty in the mentoring relationship, for directness, target-setting and challenge (in order to encourage similar qualities in the growing professional).

### Conclusion

At the very beginning of this probationer project, we were somewhat concerned to find that our committed group of beginning teachers had clearly achieved the Standard for Initial Teacher Education but claimed not really to comprehend the benchmarks on which their qualification was based. Now approaching the conclusion of the project, we find that some very committed tutors, both new and experienced, also have reservations about the effectiveness of the benchmarks as a tool for teacher formation. Compliance, expediency and mistrust may be undermining a professionalism that, as the benchmarks state, should involve values, co-operation, sensitivity, awareness of others, reflection, respect and social justice. The irony is that these good qualities are frequently evidenced in the professional interactions between tutors, beginning teachers and children throughout the course.

What may be at issue here is that the conceptual frameworks that should inform professional practice have not kept pace with recent radical changes in Scottish teacher formation, and the benchmarks are being used as forms of words that gesture towards issues that escape their formulation (possibly because the benchmarks are employed as summative as well as formative assessment devices). What we have done instead is to turn to beginning teachers' articulation of their own professional progress, listening for breakthrough moments when they realise that a qualitative change has taken place in their own self-understanding, or a troubled place

has become clear. The reaction of university tutors to the new formulation of threshold concepts in teacher development suggests that here may well be a new perspective that combines authenticity (since it emerges from beginning teachers' experience), clarity (since it exemplifies what the benchmarks mean in practice) and sensitivity (since it is responsive to the social and emotional dimensions of learning to teach). Such a conceptual framework may match the potential of good mentoring, in both faculties and schools, to advance the professional standards of Scottish teachers in the post-McCrone era.

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## Appendix A

1. *Teaching is about learning, both the particular achievements of individual children (often those who have initially presented 'problems' for the beginning teacher) and also the progress made by the class as a whole.*
  - Teaching thus comes to be seen as being crucially about structuring or segmenting or pacing the subject content appropriately, in order to meet pupils' needs, increasingly with greater relevance.
  - There may be a discovery of what assessment is, what are its forms and purposes, how it can shape future teaching and learning, how it can clarify learning purposes and positively affect children's attitudes and awareness.
  - This concept often involves 'children who make teachers think', and the realisation that this is a better working description than 'difficult' or 'troublesome' children.
2. *The same curriculum can be effectively taught in different ways by different teachers across different stretches of time.*
  - One realises that it is useless to try to teach too much for children to absorb or retain.
  - A more confident awareness emerges of the need to pace the curriculum and to judge attainment and understanding over longer stretches of time.
  - One comes to understand that the rhythm of learning involves peaks and troughs.
3. *Language creates ethos, atmosphere and positive working relationships in the classroom, and beginning teachers can learn how to talk in a way that children listen and respond to.*
  - This involves a realisation of the impact of tone, pitch, pace, emphasis and volume, varied empathetically according to the age,

- stage, needs and norms of the children being taught.
- The impact extends to, and varies within, different contexts beyond the classroom: corridor, playground, sports field, beyond the school gates and into the local community. (Issues of dialect, accent and solidarity with the community impinge here.)
  - There is a realisation that the teacher's language needs to model for children (and sometimes for parents) helpful patterns of effective thinking and social relationships.
4. *In class and behaviour management, an individual teacher is most effective when contributing to and helping to sustain the whole-school ethos and structures.*
- A confident and committed sense develops of the crucial effect of the establishment of classroom 'norms' of behaviour, organisation, and learned effectiveness (for both probationer teachers and pupils).
  - Learning to define and to confidently walk the social boundaries between firmness, direction and supportive engagement with young learners is a factor.
  - Employing discipline strategies appropriately, flexibly and yet consistently in children's eyes helps sustain a positive classroom ethos.
5. *One realises what makes reflection work, and its importance in learning to teach more insightfully and effectively.*
- There is a personalised approach to reflection and where this happens best, and a new awareness of what aids or sustains this. (Possible sources of reflection are careful observation, conversations about classroom incidents, ideas encountered in current or previous reading, journals, dialogue, networks, thinking time between observation and feedback.)
  - Apart from learning from critical incidents and colleagues' advice, prompts provided on key developmental areas can promote and support reflection.
  - There is a realisation that effective teachers are thinking much of the time about effective teaching and learning, and planning for this.
6. *One comes to understand one's own role in the mentoring process and what the aim of the mentoring process is.*
- There is a conceptual movement from being judged to becoming an active and interactive partner in a developing professional project.
  - Trust in the mentoring system can be enhanced by a layering of networks of support and advice, at varying levels of formality.
- There is a realisation, achieved through observation, anecdote or the attitude of more experienced colleagues, that success in teaching is variable but that commitment and a positive outlook are nevertheless sustainable and vital.
7. *'Professionalism' comes to be seen as attaining the confidence to make a considered choice about how the curriculum might most effectively be taught by an individual teacher to the learners for whom s/he is most closely responsible, while also accepting the need to monitor such changes in an open and honest manner.*
- Effective mentoring can model for beginning teachers this combination of flexibility, reflectiveness and responsibility.
  - One realises that imperfection is part of the picture, that learning and teaching will often be successful only in part, but that 'failures' plus reflection can contribute to professional knowledge and growth.
  - With more experience of working with others in schools, professional discourse becomes an aid to precise reflection, rather than a barrier to it.
8. *Relationships matter in teaching and learning: recognising the social dimensions of professional life can make a major difference to a teacher's individual effectiveness in the classroom.*
- Taking advice and guidance from others is basically a matter of trust.
  - There can be negative as well as positive dimensions of teacher networks, especially where there is a lack of active bridging and linking to wider social and professional experience.
  - Reciprocity and generosity matter in the creation of satisfying professional development: one's contribution and recognition within the community is a source of satisfaction all round.
9. *There is a realisation that teaching and learning take place in 'communities' that overlap and affect each other, positively and negatively: home, school and locality can assist or hinder each other's efforts for children.*
- Feedback from parents is often a revelation about children or about oneself. (They often validate the beginning teacher's effectiveness.)
  - The impact of whole-school social, celebratory, creative and sporting events comes to balance or symbolise the worth of individual efforts in teaching and learning.
  - The teacher's place within the communities of



school and locality is realised (with implications regarding norms of dress, speech, behaviour).

10. *There emerges an energising sense of 'owning' or 'earning' a professional identity, confidently and realistically understood.*

- This involves integration of particular classroom insights or experiences.
- This is often evidenced in a positive skill in

the efficient orchestration of a multiple range of educational factors, which is rarely lost thereafter.

- This is felt to be transformative, at least for this stage of development, and is recognised as such by mentors and other colleagues as well as oneself.