



Sarah Fletcher
Manshead School, Luton

Introduction

In 1988, the Licensed Teacher Scheme was proposed by the government (DES 1988). It was designed to allow mature entrants to the profession to undergo a change of career or, for example, the overseas trained teacher to obtain a teaching post. The duration of the two year training period is usually carried out in one school, under the guidance and instruction of a 'mentor'. At the end of two years, the licensed teacher is eligible for recommendation for qualified teacher status.

In his speech to the North of England Conference in January 1992, the Secretary of State expressed his strong support for school-based training. In paragraph 17 of his speech, he stressed the importance of schools and experienced teachers involved in training students knowing, 'what they are supposed to be doing and having the training, the time and the resources to do it well.'

Implications of the Licensed Teacher Scheme

The trainee teacher must have access to 'a structured, purposeful learning exercise' rather than an ill-defined experience. The mentor is concerned with organising and monitoring this 'structured purposeful learning exercise' and working alongside the trainee to maximise his or her professional development growth as a result of it.

Supplying the demand for language teachers

Through the Licensed Teacher Scheme, new teachers may be drawn from the well of former foreign language assistants. Despite the apparent current shortage of Foreign Language teachers, staffing vacancies can be filled. But the scheme brings difficulties, not least for the mentor who may find him/herself without the very training, time or resources to do an adequate, let alone a good, job. It is not a question of a lack of good will. Mentors are not able to function without adequate funding and in-service training.

If mentoring can be shared between various members of a department, so much the better, but this demands time not only for mentoring, but also for vital liaison between mentors and trainee. Subject specific advice needs to come from experts in the field, but there is no reason why the more general pastoral aspects of mentoring should not form part of an induction package run by a senior member of a school's management team. Again, the emphasis must be on liaison, on co-operation. A mentor must be wary of trying to 'own' the licensed teacher. He/she plays but one part in the trainee teacher's entry into the profession.

Does the Licensed Teacher Scheme work?

Recently, I visited a large, successful modern languages department in a nearby school. When I asked about the current staffing provision in the department I was surprised and saddened to hear the following comment.

'We used to have a licensed teacher, but it didn't work out and so we won't have another one . . .'

I was saddened because I wondered what had become of the cast-off trainee let alone the disillusioned mentor. Then I began to consider my own attitude as a mentor and to listen more intently to the feedback I was getting from the two trainees in my Faculty. I realised that although we were all doing our best,

we all had serious misgivings about the effectiveness of our training programme.

The second year trainee was still uncertain that the programme would really give her the status of a teacher trained through more traditional channels in a department of education. The first year trainee was troubled that the scheme of work and the shortage of time available to deliver it meant that she did not have time to experiment with different approaches as a student on teaching practice might have done. Both lamented the fact that they sometimes felt that they had been employed because they were 'cheap staff'.

Preparing to be a mentor

Having taught a wide range of age and ability levels, during nearly twenty years in a variety of schools, I felt that I had amassed sufficient experience to act as a mentor. My headmaster assured me that any member of the senior management team could do the job, but I felt the need for specific training for the role. I am very glad that I did undergo training, albeit in my own time after school.

In my opinion, mentoring is not simply an extension of management skills nor of teaching experience. It demands specific qualities of the mentor, particularly the ability to work as a partner, not always as a teacher, in a learning process shared with another adult. Maybe this does come naturally to some experienced teachers; I was grateful for assistance in broadening my outlook. The trainee is not the only one who is 'learning on the job'. The mentor is too, and must be prepared to make mistakes and adjustments all along the line.

Producing a training programme

The Secretary of State said that schools and experienced teachers involved in training must, 'know what they are doing.' Of course! But do they? The Bedfordshire Training Course that I underwent was excellent in many ways, largely because it encouraged me to develop a structured approach to mentoring. Following the steps in Mike Berrill's *Foundations for Excellence*, I set out a programme encompassing twelve areas to be covered in depth and then estimated the time that would be needed to study each area of study. As some of the areas seemed to overlap, I decided to run two areas concurrently, over half term intervals. It all seemed so well organised . . .

This was one of the first difficulties that I encountered. The training plan needs to be drawn up jointly WITH the trainee, but at the outset neither mentor nor trainee is really in a position to do this, with any certainty. What is more, a training plan is all very well, but it cannot allow for the countless interruptions that dogged our early stages; illness, lost non-contact periods, emergencies etc. Though I had allowed for us to revisit each area in the best tradition of spiral learning, we still missed great chunks out of our plan and spent too long on other areas.

Personal qualities essential to a mentor

The most immediate quality is flexibility, the second patience. Neither are easy to muster if you, the mentor are snowed under with other responsibilities. It is not always easy to drop the plan that you have carefully prepared for the mentoring session, but sometimes you must do so. If there has been an 'eye-ball to eye-ball' confrontation between your new member of staff and a belligerent member of year 11 in the previous lesson, it is no use planning to discuss the finer points of displaying pupils' work!

Sometimes, a mentor needs all the skill of a psychologist to

translate some of the unspoken messages being broadcast by the 'mentoree'. I soon learnt that, 'It doesn't matter, I don't care!' really means, 'I can't cope!' Few people like to admit that they are having trouble coping and the mentor needs the ability to read minds and sometimes sufficient tact to keep quiet particularly when it would be all too easy to invade and provide a pat answer. The whole process of mentoring is reminiscent of Emile's education in Rousseau's famous work. The learner must feel that he has freedom, but the freedom is carefully engineered to make it as secure as possible.

It is all too tempting for the mentor to plough in and be prescriptive. Effective mentoring should not produce mentor-clones. It must promote the growth of an individual who will seek his own solutions to problems. Once again, I stress the importance of sharing mentoring with another member of staff, otherwise the whole process can have a somewhat narrow, almost incestuous, feel to it!

Mentoring: a challenging role

The Licensed teacher will need to observe and discuss many lessons during the training process as well as being under scrutiny by other more experienced staff. He or she must be encouraged to challenge accepted techniques and it is sometimes difficult for a mentor to cope with this. If the process of mentoring is functioning properly, it is the mentor as well as the trainee who is carefully analyzing his or her teaching ability. It is a shock to realise that as an experienced teacher you may have let your standards drop over the years and that you too are unlikely to satisfy all of the criteria that are being demanded of the new teacher in the training programme.

Pupils are quick to realise the change in role of their staff from teacher to mentor. They will challenge the mentor and the trainee teacher to confirm their suspicions that it is not they, but their teacher who is under assessment. They may well resent the intrusion of an observer in the room, especially if he or she is making notes every few minutes as detailed monitoring of the trainee's performance sometimes demands.

Mentoring is, in every way, a challenging role but it can be frustrating and stressful as well as rewarding. A mentor is on call at all times and being so cannot afford the luxury of having an off day! If you are feeling below par you can guarantee that you will be called upon to give help when you least feel like doing so! Just as you are settling into a peaceful lesson you may find yourself summoned to sort out chaos next door or to struggle with the video that simply refuses to work. . . . In short, a mentor has to be prepared to plan ahead for two people, when (s)he may have had years of experience in thinking only for him or herself.

One of the dangers of mentoring is that you may find yourself over-used as a kind of peace-keeper or policeman. If so, it is vital to stress to the trainee teacher that you need to be able to praise the good points as well as admonish the sins of their pupils when you arrive. If not, you will soon destroy the delicate balance of trust that exists between you and many in the class. As a mentor you need to be able to work with fine sensitivity and recognise

and deal with problems long before they develop into crises . . .

Mentoring: a partnership

The mentor must work in unison, not only with the licensed teacher, but also with the senior management team if the partnership is to work . . . This is not always easy. Leaving aside personal differences, there are likely to be conflicts over a clash of priorities.

I have heard a number of mentors lamenting the shortage of time that prevents them from accomplishing a satisfactory programme with their new colleagues. This is a whole school issue and neither the mentor nor the licensed teacher should be expected to scrape by with inadequate resources. Time is the most valuable commodity of all in schools and the one likely to be in shortest supply.

Before mentoring is undertaken, it is essential to establish the priority that it will have in the timetable and in the financial outlay by the school. Mentoring is a shared responsibility, not something to be born by an individual teacher, no matter how willing or suitable they may seem to become a mentor. After all, the hoped for outcome (a confident, happy, reliable and efficient colleague) will affect every member of the school. It is only right that the induction of a new colleague should also be shared. Part of learning to teach is about working in a team of fellow professionals, not about operating in self-centred isolation.

Unfortunately, the mentoring scheme is open to abuse. Mentoring sessions may be seen as a soft alternative to teaching, time for a pleasant chat, and be counted within the normal allocation of non-contact periods. Mentors may find themselves unrewarded financially for the many hours of additional work that running a programme may entail. In my opinion, every mentor should resist such abuse by asking for adequate resources, or they too are diminishing the professional status of their work.

Sadly, some senior management teams are likely to be more concerned with saving money or filling staff vacancies than investing sufficient resources in the hope of long-term benefit to the school and ultimately to the profession. Taking on a licensed teacher is a gamble. It may not work out or the new teacher may move on before they can repay, in terms of work for their training school, the investment that their training has cost. On the other hand, the very process of mentoring can be of significant benefit to the host school, bringing as it does a fresh appraisal of long-established and sometimes outmoded practices in the classroom.

The role of mentor is not one to be entered into lightly. It demands a heavy commitment and it is not always rewarding. I am glad that I have had the opportunity to be a mentor and I intend to continue. Even so, I have reservations about the scheme and hope that this paper will enable other mentors to avoid some of the pitfalls that await the unwary. Caveat mentor!

Bibliography

Margaret Wilkin (Ed.). (1992) *Mentoring in Schools*, Kogan Page.