Best Practice Research Scholarship Report

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Context

I began my teaching career at Hanham High School as an NQT in September 2001. Hanham High School is a mixed comprehensive of approximately 1000 pupils situated on the outskirts of Bristol and has recently become a Performing Arts School. I am a Spanish and French teacher working in a department of six and have been involved in mentoring Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) for the last year and a half. On completing my PGCE at Bath University, I immediately embarked on an MA in Education. I have recently transferred to Bath Spa University College to complete my studies at Master’s level.

Underachievement, poor attitude towards school and challenging behaviour are some of the challenges facing someone who wants to establish themselves as a teacher at Hanham High School and consequently these topics often become a focus of mentoring sessions particularly with NQT’s. This means that valuable time can be taken away from discussing issues that might further assist a new teacher’s professional development. My particular strength is behaviour management and I am regularly asked by mentors of NQT’s in other departments to give help and advice on the subject. Part of my work within BPRS was to be able to model Behaviour Management to other colleagues in order to raise pupil achievement.

What were your original aims?

When I applied for BPRS, I did not have one single research question, but rather a general area I wanted to improve. I knew I wanted to improve my generic mentoring skills through peer mentoring alongside other colleagues. I originally decided to focus my BPRS work on improving my practice as a mentor having introduced a Learning Partners (peer mentoring) project with my Year 7 pupils. I also hoped to work with 2 colleagues in a mentoring scenario and by seeking feedback from them, I would be able to improve my communication and mentoring skills which I would then use in further mentoring relationships with NQT’s and Novice Teachers. Although my focus changed somewhat owing to unforeseen circumstances in school, I believe that my initial research into peer mentoring among students, informed much of my more recent mentoring work. When the member of PHSE staff I had hoped to work with left the school an opportunity arose for me to mentor an NQT. Being aware of the practicalities of what could and couldn’t be achieved at school, when I found that it was necessary to change my research focus I engaged in an Action Research process with my mentor (McNiff, 2003) to decide on the way forward.

My original aims were:

- To reflect on my own professional skills / professional values / professional knowledge and understanding (QAA, ITE, Scotland, 2000) as a mentor
- To reflect on my own professional skills / professional values / professional knowledge and understanding (QAA, ITE, Scotland, 2000) as a mentee
- To contribute, through my mentoring, to my own (CPD) continuing professional development and that of other staff. (Currie, 2004)
- To develop a culture of self-organised learning (Fletcher and Coombs, 2004) through mentoring within the context of the school as a learning organisation. (Senge, 1990)
- To identify and disseminate through face-to-face and web based technologies good practice in mentoring (Fletcher, 2000).
In what ways did you refine your aims?

It was important that my BPRS work remain an integral part of my work in school especially when, in January 2004, I became an AST (Advanced Skills Teacher). Part of my responsibility focused on working with the other AST in the school and running a coaching and mentoring scheme for staff. Identifying a BPRS mentor was easy - as I had worked with Sarah Fletcher in my PGCE year and during the first two years of my MA.

Working with my mentor was crucial to refine my research aims as she provided me with focus, support, direction, challenge, constructive criticism in safe environment and was an excellent critical friend. In the course of being mentored I was confronted with questions that challenged my assumptions and caused me to question myself further about my professional practice.

The good quality mentoring I had received over the years and continued to receive from Sarah Fletcher provided me with a good role model. Although some of my other experiences of being mentored provided me with an insight into the destructive effect that mentoring can have in the wrong hands (Colley, 2003). The question that I finally decided upon as a focus for my work was, “How can I improve my mentoring to enable myself and other colleagues to develop professionally?”

Which research processes did you find helpful?

The process of writing up BPRS has helped me to put into context what I have been doing as a teacher over the last 3 years. Discussion of my ideas with colleagues at the University of Bath Summer School course on Mentoring in 2003 challenged me to think more deeply about my values as a mentor and a mentee and on the skills needed to be an effective mentor and mentee. (Fletcher, 2000) I also began to video my sessions with my mentee and invite feedback from her on the processes I used in a mentoring session and their effectiveness. (Fletcher, 2001)

A thorough review of current literature on the subject of mentoring enabled me to put my work in the context of others’ and to gain an insight into some of the changes, particularly in mentoring trainee teachers, that have occurred in mentoring over the last few years. My mentor guided my reading to deepen my understanding. She advised a range of relevant literature, including her own publications, to assist me.

The research processes that have helped me to improve my practice as a mentor are:

- Working closely with a mentor so that I can experience a good model of mentoring.
- Learning alongside an NQT / mentee which reminds me that teaching has to be a constant cycle / process of 2-way learning.
- The importance of collaborative action enquiry with my mentee.

Which research processes did your pupils find helpful?

The digital videoing of mentoring sessions as well as observed lessons allowed my mentees to look in more detail at their practice and provided a focus for discussions.

The focus on giving constructive feedback has helped two different NQT’s to develop professionally and personally. One has improved her consistency in dealing with bad behaviour and has given her confidence. This means that the benefit to pupils has been a more consistent approach to behaviour management and a calmer working atmosphere in the classroom. I believe I helped another NQT to help her pupils by encouraging her to reflect on her own practice, which was made easier by the use of digital video. This benefited the pupils by ensuring that their teacher was learning from her mistakes and improving her teaching and the pupils’ learning.
What were the learning points you gained from undertaking the research and what were your findings?

“Mentoring means guiding and supporting trainees to ease them through difficult transitions; it is about smoothing the way, enabling, reassuring as well as directing, managing and instructing. It should unblock the ways to change by building self-confidence, self-esteem and a readiness to act as well as to engage in ongoing constructive interpersonal relationships. Mentoring is concerned with continuing personal as well as professional development (CPPD) and not just continuing professional development.”

Fletcher, 2000, p.1

It has helped me to realise that informal mentoring is equally useful i.e. when not restricted to a formal relationship and that spontaneity can be useful in both formal and informal mentoring which is why mentoring cannot be restricted by time. Schön’s (1987) definitions of ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action’ have helped me to understand the dual role of mentoring as reflection on past practice / observation as well as reflection whilst in the process of doing something.

I have become a more confident and effective mentor through the feedback I have received from my mentees and from my mentor.

The main learning points I have gained from undertaking my BPRS research are:

- That mentoring should not be restricted by an insistence on time and place.
- Mentoring is most valuable when ‘contingent’ and that mentoring that is restricted by time causes missed learning moments / opportunities for both the mentor and the mentee.
- The importance of mentoring in personal as well as professional development.

What evidence relates to this learning and your findings?

- My accreditation as an Advanced Skills Teacher.
- Accreditation of my work as part of my Masters degree.
- The establishment of the mentoring scheme at Hanham High School.
- Being regularly asked to mentor staff outside of my subject area.
- Leading a session on Mentoring at the University of Bath Summer School 2003.
- Assisting with a presentation on Research Mentoring with Sarah Fletcher at BERA (British Educational Research Association) Annual Conference, Edinburgh 2003

What are the questions for your future practice?

- How can I evidence the benefits of good quality mentoring of staff to pupils' learning?
- How can I assist my NQT’s to improve their own practice and develop professionally and personally?
- How can I further assist my school in its provision of mentor as part of CPD for all staff?
- As an AST how can I assist other schools in developing a culture of mentoring as a tool for improving CPD?

What are the questions for your school?

- How can we create an environment in which mentoring becomes an integral part of CPD?
- How can we building upon good practice to provide opportunities for mentees to become mentors?
Are there any questions for further research?

- How can we develop mentoring practices to improve staff morale and retention across the profession?
- How can we collect and use data to evidence that mentoring can and does improve teaching and learning?

How did you disseminate your findings with others?

Locally

- I have become a founder member of the group that has introduced mentoring for staff other than NQT’s at Hanham High School.
- I have led a discussion of my research at the University of Bath Teacher Research Network.

Nationally

- I assisted with a presentation on Research Mentoring with Sarah Fletcher at BERA Conference, Edinburgh 2003.
- My research will be offered for display on the forthcoming ‘Teacher Research’ section of the BECTA (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency) website

Internationally

- My research has been accepted as Research of the Month for December 2004 on http://www.TeacherResearch.net

References


