Mentoring as a Professional Practice: Inquiry, Sense-Making, and Collaboration

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Introduction

Throughout the world, classroom teachers volunteer to serve as teacher mentors (TMs) to teacher candidates (TCs) on practicum. The practicum in North America, similar to many other jurisdictions in the world, constitutes up to one third of a TC's Bachelor of Education program. In classrooms throughout the province of British Columbia, Canada, where this study takes place, TMs supervise TCs for 12 weeks of practicum experience: an introductory 2-week practicum in first semester and a 10-week extended practicum in the second semester. Unquestionably, the practicum is a vital part of all teacher preparation programs and TMs play a large role in determining the success or otherwise of TCs in these programs. However, there is typically little if

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any professional development for TMs and scant recognition of their contribution to teacher education. Zeichner (2002) suggests that "more than providing access to a classroom or modelling a particular version of good practice, [being a good TM] involves active mentoring" (p. 59). Yet mentoring, despite widespread agreement over its importance, remains one of the most neglected elements of teacher education (Mattsson et al., 2011; Sullivan & Glanz, 2009; Zeichner, 2002). As a result, TMs as school-based teacher educators often work in professional isolation.

Even within the academy, teacher education professors have faced a historically inverted status when measured by their proximity to schools (Lanier & Little, 1986); that is, the work of preparing teachers has relatively low status compared to other dimensions of their academic life (Zeichner, 2002). However, despite the often ignored and undervalued role of teacher education in school and university contexts, the stakes are high: For our school students to have the best possible teachers tomorrow, our teacher candidates need the best possible teacher mentors today. To that end, this study examines teacher mentoring as a professional practice in light of two specific dimensions: (1) practitioner inquiry, and (2) *a knowledge base* (Hargreaves, 2001). Hargreaves (2001) argues that these two attributes distinguish professional practice from other categories of employment such as labor or technical work (where daily tasks are typically prescribed in advance and require little judgment on the part of the practitioner). Absent these two elements, as was shown to be the case for 70% of mentors across Canada in earlier studies (Bariteau & Clarke, 2006), classroom teachers often "mentor as they were mentored" without thinking critically about why they do what they do (Hobson et al., 2009). Mentoring from this perspective is not only indifferent to the contexts in which beginning teachers learn their craft but antithetical to teaching as a professional practice. Further, without a curiosity about one's practice or any attempt to draw upon a knowledge base for mentoring, TMs typically fall back on instinctual and atheoretical approaches to their work as school-based teacher educators (Kent, 2001; Clarke et al., 2014). Under such circumstances, TMs:

- Fail to identify the characteristics of learning to teach that are relevant to today's TCs (Smith, 2005).
- Fail to effectively communicate such characteristics to TCs (Hastings, 2004).
- Fail to attend to such characteristics in TCs (Swennen et al., 2008).

When mentors are irrelevant, ineffective, and inattentive, they also fail as stewards of the profession. Research shows that mentors who are not curious about their practice 'Pass' twice as many students on practicum as do their more professionally prepared counterparts (Clarke, 2003). Given Kent's (2001) suggestion that mentoring "must continue into the initial teaching years if the ultimate goal of supervision, professional autonomy, is to be realized" (p. 244), then the reasons are all the more compelling for TMs to be professionally prepared and ready for their work as school-based teacher educators. In an attempt to address this concern, this study provides the opportunity for mentors to articulate the assumptions that underlie their practice (an important first step in practitioner inquiry) and then examine and reflect upon those assumptions in the light of their understandings of mentoring (a critical step in constructing a knowledge base for mentoring).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study emerged from our previous work with mentors. This framework reflects Sarason's (1996) perspective on practitioner inquiry and Hegarty's (2000) perspective on *knowledge bases*. In particular, when taken together, we argue that these two dimensions provide the dynamic interplay that underpins mentoring as a professional practice. We refer to this interplay in terms of a 'mentoring kite' where our hope is that all mentors are either at or moving toward the apex of the kite (Fig. 1).

The two dimensions of the mentoring kite—practitioner inquiry and a knowledge base—delineate four realities for mentoring in practicum settings: professional, theoretical, practical, and inept. Mentors whose practice is professional have a keen appreciation for mentoring based on an intentional examination of their practice and a critical engagement in
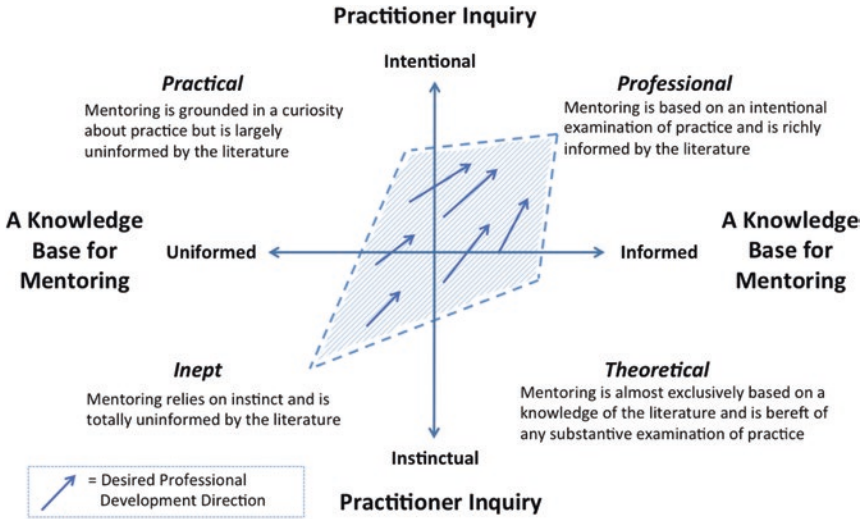
Practitioner Inquiry

Intentional

Practical
Mentoring is grounded in a curiosity about practice but is largely uninformed by the literature

Professional
Mentoring is based on an intentional examination of practice and is richly informed by the literature

A Knowledge Base for Mentoring   Uniformed

Informed   **A Knowledge Base for Mentoring**

Inept
Mentoring relies on instinct and is totally uninformed by the literature

Theoretical
Mentoring is almost exclusively based on a knowledge of the literature and is bereft of any substantive examination of practice

Instinctual

= Desired Professional Development Direction

Practitioner Inquiry

Fig. 1 The mentoring kite

the knowledge associated with that practice. Diagonally opposite are those who show little interest in their work as school-based teacher educators. Their mentoring is largely instinctual and uninformed. As TMs, they are largely inept. The remaining group of mentors fall somewhere within the practical or theoretical quadrants. We argue that these two quadrants provide important grounding for a shift to the professional quadrant. However, TMs who remain solely in either of these two quadrants run the risk of their mentoring being lopsided or asymmetrical.

We acknowledge that there are other elements (e.g., ethics) that are important in any conceptualization of mentoring as a professional practice. However, we believe that many of these elements are embedded to varying degrees in the interplay of the two dimensions outlined above. The goal of this study, therefore, is to explore the mentoring kite as a way of thinking about mentoring as a professional practice. Two questions guide this exploration. First, with regard to practitioner inquiry: In what ways are TMs inquisitive about their practice (i.e., do they attempt to make explicit and examine their assumptions underlying mentoring)? Second, with regard to a knowledge base: To what extent do TMs explore and develop a knowledge base for mentoring?

The Study

To address the questions posed above, an interview-based study was conducted in British Columbia from March to May, 2018. The timing of the study coincided with the TCs' ten-week extended practicum. The TMs recruited for this study supervised TCs from a UBC elementary teacher education program option called *Community and Inquiry for Teacher Education* or CITE (https://www.cite.cste.educ.ubc.ca). The first author, Clarke, has a long-standing relationship with the CITE program. This relationship allowed ready access to TMs and TCs. At Clarke's request, the CITE coordinator, a seconded teacher from the school district in which the study took place, nominated 12 TMs whom she believed would be interested in participating in the study. All 12 were invited to participate. Eight volunteered. Authors Fritzlan and Robertson conducted the interviews with this purposive sample (Palys, 2008), each working with four mentors.

The mentors were interviewed on four occasions over the course of the extended practicum. The interviews were semi-structured allowing Fritzlan and Robertson the freedom to pursue aspects of mentoring that arose during the interviews and that may not have been explicit as part of the initial interview protocol. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed by each interviewer. Detailed field notes, recorded after each interview, captured the overall impression of the interviews along with other contextual details relevant to the study. Drawing on the constant comparative method for qualitative data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the transcripts and associated field notes were read and reread by the respective interviewer to discern emergent themes. As the analysis evolved, eight meetings of all three authors were held during the collection and subsequent analysis of the data: four meetings were held during data collection and four meetings were held after the data collection.

As with all qualitative work, there are important limitations that need be acknowledged at the outset. First, the TMs in the study were all elementary school teachers therefore the outcomes are related to this particular context. Second, the study drew on a purposive sample, therefore the claims emerging from the study must be tempered by the fact that the

TMs in this study constituted a convenience sample (Saumure, 2008) compared to, for example, a random sample. Finally, the act of interviewing TMs constitutes a perturbation at the research sites that meant the context in which this study took place was different from regular practicum settings. All these limitations need to be kept in mind when considering the outcomes of this study.

Analysis

Below, five themes are presented as illustrative of the ways in which the TMs in this study responded to their role as teacher mentors in terms of their curiosity about mentoring and the knowledge developed or drawn upon in their role as mentors. The themes represent common concerns, considerations, and, in some instances, prevailing questions that the mentors shared with the interviewers about their practice.

Gatekeepers of the Profession

The TMs in this study regularly referred to their role as "gatekeepers of the profession" (Clarke et al., 2014, p. 176). The TMs' decisions about the success or otherwise of their TCs was based on the simple question: Is my TC suitable to be a teacher of children? By the third interview all mentors had used this or similar terms in reference to their role as mentors. Illustrative excerpts include:

Eileen: How important are we …? Oh, very important, gatekeepers-of-the-profession important.

Tara: This is going to be your child's teacher, your friend's teacher… really making sure that we maintain the integrity of the profession, for our sake, for the children's sake, for the community and the public's sake as well.

Sam: I have the knowledge of what it means to be an educator. I have the knowledge of what it means to be a parent. And I put those two things together. Would I trust my child in their classroom?

At UBC, both the TM and the university faculty advisor (FA) (who visits each TM once a week during the practicum) are responsible for deciding if a TC successfully completed the practicum, but the TM's decision carries the most weight in this process. Six of the eight TCs assigned to the TMs in this study successfully completed the practicum. Two TCs self-selected to withdraw from the practicum during the seventh week. Both fell well short of meeting the expected requirements for a 'Pass.' Both were given the option of repeating the practicum in the following year and were required to undertake additional course work beyond the regular B.Ed. course work to improve their knowledge and skills for teaching (e.g., their pedagogical knowledge, their language skills, etc.) The two TMs who decided that their TCs were not ready to be certified as teachers found it very difficult to communicate this to their TCs but were reassured about their decision by their commitment to their role as gatekeepers of the profession.

Rachel: You feel bad because you think, "Oh my gosh, I've destroyed somebody's hopes and dreams"… But then you do say, you know what, that was the right thing to do. It was the right thing for my students.

Real and immediate consideration of the requirements to become a teacher played out in the interviews. Gatekeeping was both personal and professional extending from individual sense-making to a broader articulation of the challenges, duties, and demands entailed in teacher mentoring. The TMs also noted that engaging in difficult conversations was not something that they were prepared for or about which they had a deep knowledge.

In relation to the gatekeeper role, the TMs reflected on the fact that "schools [are becoming] increasingly diverse, both with regard to student population as well as teacher population" and that, therefore, we "need to explore the ramifications of these changes" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 139) for those we certify for the profession. Thus, even seemingly benign circumstances are perhaps the very reason that TMs look and look again at what exactly is sustained or stifled, encouraged or discouraged by existing norms and practices of mentoring. Nonetheless, their focus on

the well-being of students underscored the importance of an ethic of care in their work as mentors (Akiba, 2017). In all of this, the mentors displayed both a curiosity about their mentoring practice and a desire to develop their knowledge base for mentoring.

Reflection as an Essential Component of Becoming a Teacher and a Mentor

Throughout the interviews, the TMs explained the ways in which they fostered reflective practice by asking TCs to routinely examine their practice. This, in turn, became part of the process for TCs to build upon pedagogical and curricular theory/practice and to embody an inquiry-based teacher identity. TMs further spoke of the TCs' openness to change and growth as being a vital part of the mentoring process.

Eileen: It [i.e., the TC's experience] is not hierarchical. It's understanding what it means to be a learner.

Tara: I would rather have a TC come in with some sense of modesty and humility because it means they're open to growth.

A TC's lack of openness to inquiry or tendency to mindlessly duplicate a TM's teaching practice triggered the question: How do we as TMs encourage a reflective disposition in our TCs? This led to an examination by the TMs about expectations for 'success' in the classroom and the fear or avoidance of 'failure' on the part of TCs. As much as TMs embraced success for its obvious feelings of accomplishment and fulfillment, they revealed their thinking about failure in terms of it being an opportunity for learning. For example, Sam tried to explain this to his TCs in the following excerpt:

Sam: You just watched me fail at a lesson, and that's going to be okay because I'm going to learn something from it… It's the ability to reflect on a lesson and say that worked or that didn't work.

Throughout the study, such remarks are traces of the TMs' emphasis on humility within the context of teaching; that is, recognizing that 'what

you don't know' is as important as recognizing 'what you do know.' And making this explicit was part of being a good teacher and for the TMs it was part of being a good mentor. At times, this concern was manifest in how some TCs were overly defensive when receiving feedback:

Eileen: If you hear the TC say something [in response to feedback], and you're kind of going, "Oh boy, I don't think you realize how that might be perceived by a very experienced colleague," or an action or something… then I would call [the TC] on it. And not in, like, a calling-out way but in a mentor's way.

This sense of openness was mirrored in the TMs' reflections on their own teaching practices:

Adrienne: As a mentor, I have to share my experiences and my values, beliefs, and my way of teaching with a potential colleague, making sure that that person does his or her best, so the growth has been quite significant for me. I have to be aware of what I say, how I present myself. I have to make sure that I am teaching currently and trying new strategies, learning and growing, reading and research… it's helped me become more reflective in my practice.

Moreover, the TMs appreciated the study's intervention as it provided a conversational space for their sense-making of mentoring. Curiously, this opportunity was made easier because of the time for reflection afforded by having a TC. The TMs noted that too often when they stepped away from their classroom duties for the benefit of the TCs' independent practice, they tackled an onslaught of other duties and tasks. However, the study presented a chance for them to talk about and reflect upon their mentoring. This reminder emphasized a more pragmatic challenge of mentoring in practicum settings: the lack of time necessary for examining and developing one's mentoring practice. Thus, the possibilities for inquiry into one's mentoring practice are limited by the time available. Nonetheless, when given the opportunity, the TMs displayed a hunger for this opportunity.

The Gleaning of Knowledge

Just as teachers are expected to continually update their classroom skills by engaging with TCs, it might be reasonable to expect that TM's would continually update their mentoring skills as part of their commitment to the practicum. However, it was the former that was noted more frequently than the latter in our interviews with teachers. For example, the TMs in this study noted an exchange of knowledge between TCs and themselves regarding classroom practice:

Rachel: I think [the TCs] do bring in new knowledge and new ideas. And technology is one area that I've really found that I learn every time one comes in.

Sam: [The TC's] passion for something was really neat to see. And it made me look at things in a new way. So when they say, "I'd really like to teach this," I'm like, "Oh, okay, let's go for it." And I always learn something new from them, the same way I learn new things from my students. They come in and say they want to learn about something, and then it sparks an interest in the classroom. And then we all go off on a tangent in another direction. Being a teacher means being a life-long learner. And, if you can't daily find something new that you've learned, well then, what's the point, right?

Thus, while the practicum is structured as a learning experience for TCs, the reciprocal professional development benefits for TMs (e.g., exposure to new teaching strategies) were very much evident in this study. By extension, we wondered about the impact of the university faculty advisor on the TMs' mentoring practice. However, any reference to the FAs by the TMs indicated that their interactions were usually very brief and primarily about practicum administration. Thus, the potential opportunity for professional learning about mentoring through engagement with the FAs was not evident in this study.

In sum, gleaning knowledge from TCs about new teaching ideas and practices was significant for the TMs in this study. However, for the purposes of this study, the TMs' demonstration and modeling of

open-mindedness in terms of learning from their TCs was instructive. To the best of our knowledge, this demonstration and modeling of open-mindedness by TMs has not been reported extensively in the literature. This professional disposition—foundational to practitioner inquiry—underscores an important dimension of mentoring as a professional practice.

Promoting TC Autonomy

The TMs in this study described the complex work of providing an environment in which TCs could develop their professional autonomy. TMs recognized the value of proceeding from a TC's unique strengths and experiences toward this end. Common approaches emerged during the interviews, such as patiently allowing TCs to flounder at first before finding their feet in order to help them understand and form a more self-assured approach to their teaching. TCs were encouraged to take risks, try different things, and find out what worked for them. All eight TMs held a career-long perspective where "what is more important than preparing student teachers for their first year of teaching… is preparing them for all the years that follow" (Kent, 2001, p. 244). In this respect, TCs simply emulating TMs' practices was not valued as a mentoring outcome by the TMs:

Rachel: They have this really beautiful sense of, "Oh I want to be like you!" And it's like, "No, I've been teaching for eighteen years, you know?" So, it's really about helping support people to enter and be confident in starting their own path.

The TMs expressed the importance of TCs' own meaning-making processes. The TMs, who all had many years of teaching experience, expressed the development of autonomy as something gained over time:

Tara: I think teaching is such a personal thing. Of course, we need to coach [TCs] and supervise them and give them ideas, give them feedback. But in the end, you know, they're the ones that are

> going to be living the job. And it's not going to be the same for them as it is for me, so they need to kind of figure out what they *do* want to take from me and what they *don't*.... Talking about it is really valuable, just talking through things, and not even so much me giving feedback as hearing them give feedback.

During our analysis, a question arose among the researchers as to the TMs' various perceived meanings of autonomy and, thereby, its significance not only to teacher mentoring but to the broader educational culture in which 'learning to teach' occurs. As a part of this discussion we recalled Eileen's remarks about what autonomy means in terms of the differences she observed between being the teaching cultures of Finland and Canada.

Eileen: [Finland's teaching culture] is around professional learning … it's all about professional autonomy. But BC teachers, … it is not long before someone [misguidedly] says: "Autonomy? Do you mean, just do whatever you want?" So we're mentoring people but what are we mentoring them *in*? Not only 'doing well' … but on thinking and going into your practice and learning about how kids learn, and being responsive. Teaching in different ways.

For Eileen, being a TM means having a clear sense of one's intentions as a teacher mentor. TC autonomy for TMs, then, takes on added significance within the context of mentoring. For the teachers in this study, supporting TC autonomy was an important feature of their mentoring practice. TMs tried to articulate, expand upon, and describe why autonomy was important to TCs. Finally, as they tried to make sense of the notion of autonomy within the context of the 'learning to teach' this presented some challenges due to fine line between 'being there' for TCs one the one hand and then 'letting them find their own feet' on the other hand.

Communities of Practice

The TMs in this study articulated the broader concepts of collaborative practice within the school community as key components in career-long learning within the profession. They described their awareness as role models in demonstrating how to work collaboratively with others (teachers, administrators, teaching assistants, counselors, etc.):

Adrienne: It's not always a very collaborative profession, but it really should be. I mean, that's how we learn and grow.

The TMs' focus on collaboration is reminiscent of the Clarke et al. (2014) claim that TMs are 'conveners of relation' within practicum settings. As such, TMs are responsible for introducing TCs to the school community and helping them to build professional relationships "with other actors within the practice context" (Clarke et al., 2014, p. 180). In as much as TCs are newcomers to the profession, the analogy of second-language learners is appropriate here: TCs learn a new language, of sorts, expressed by TMs from within the culture of schooling. For second-language learners, Richards (1980) concludes that gaining "conversational competence" (p. 430) is open-ended and just as important as the more technical, grammatical features of individual fluency. By analogy, being a teacher is not limited to technical dimensions (e.g., planning, management, assessment, reporting) but also to the relational aspects of schooling. More broadly, moving beyond strictly collegial to collaborative responsibilities becomes one way to enhance professional learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

However, what stimulates a TC's response to collaboration can become a source of tension in the mentoring relationship, however mild or severe. As a TM noted, the practicum is a meeting of two "spirits":

Ryan: When I compare it to past TCs, the interactions [this time] got heavier when things aren't moving in a way that you'd think they should go. I guess we have some natural expectations of growth. When the two spirits haven't met, [and they have to] grind it out together, then it just doesn't seem to work as well. Maybe each [TM/TC pairing] is building something together.

For TMs emphasizing the need to be collaborative is quite different from actually being collaborative. It takes time, effort, and modeling:

Tara: Model it, like we do with our students. It's a skill you need… when you realize you need help, or there's something you want an opinion on. It's a strength to go and ask for it.

Adrienne: [My TC] has done a lot of co-planning with another teacher candidate. It's just been a wonderful working relationship. We've done some co-teaching, kind of mixed the two groups up and done a lot of work together.… The kids see that mod-elling, too. It helps them work together, if we're working together and they see it.

TMs in this study also noted the importance of TCs being involved in extracurricular collaboration with other teachers and administrators in the school such as coaching teams, chaperoning field trips, providing breakfast to students before school, and working with school choirs. The idea that the TM, alone, is the sole mentor of a TC was something that the TMs in this study dismissed. Assuredly, the TM plays a primary role, as does the university FA, but the TMs in this study emphasized that learning to teach is always a collective endeavor:

Christine: It's sort of a village, right? We're all working towards improv-ing our profession and holding it to a high standard, which is what we should do, especially now that jobs are so easily and readily available.

Ryan: My role is to understand… what my strengths are and weak-nesses, to be as honest as I can with [the TC] on those, to provide spaces where I can show her some strengths and what that might look like, and also to let her go and explore with other people some things that I'm not so good at.

In sum, the TMs saw collaboration as important for learning new com-petencies, skills, and abilities. In this regard, the notion of 'communities of practice' was seen as beneficial for both TCs and TMs although TMs warned that the opportunity for them were limited in terms of learning

about mentoring. To this end, the notion of collaboration that arose as a result of the TMs' engagement with the researchers in this project is explored later in this chapter as an area for future study.

Outcomes

The Mentoring Kite: Revisited

The outcomes of our analysis resulted in substantive change to the mentoring kite. Without doubt the eight TMs in this study were all engaged in a form of practitioner inquiry (the vertical axis) as their mentoring unfolded over the course of the ten-week practicum. However, from reading the transcripts and reviewing the field notes, it became clear that the way in which we originally described the upper and lower extremes of this axis fell short of what we witnessed during the practicum. Notably, our study revealed that while 'intent' was an important part of practitioner inquiry, 'instinct' was not its polar opposite. In an attempt for greater clarity, we have revised the labels for each end of the practitioner inquiry axis to read 'interested in and curious about practice' and 'largely indifferent about practice,' respectively (Fig. 2).

Further, the eight TMs did not simply draw on exclusively codified information in terms of a specialized knowledge base for mentoring but rather were actively constructing their own knowledge base for mentoring throughout the practicum. Thus, we revised the label for the horizontal axis as 'sense-making' as this descriptor better captured how and in what ways TMs were developing their knowledge about mentoring. The descriptors for each end of the horizontal axis were also revised accordingly.

The revisions to the two axes had a ripple effect across the kite resulting in other important changes. For example, we felt that our rendering of the four realities delineated by the two axes was better represented by the following descriptors: professional, conceptually conversant, practice-driven, and unaware. In making these changes, we found the idiom "talk the talk and walk the walk" (i.e., the ability to back up one's words with equivalent actions and vice versa) to be a particularly good shorthand for summarizing the overall impact of these revisions on each quadrant.
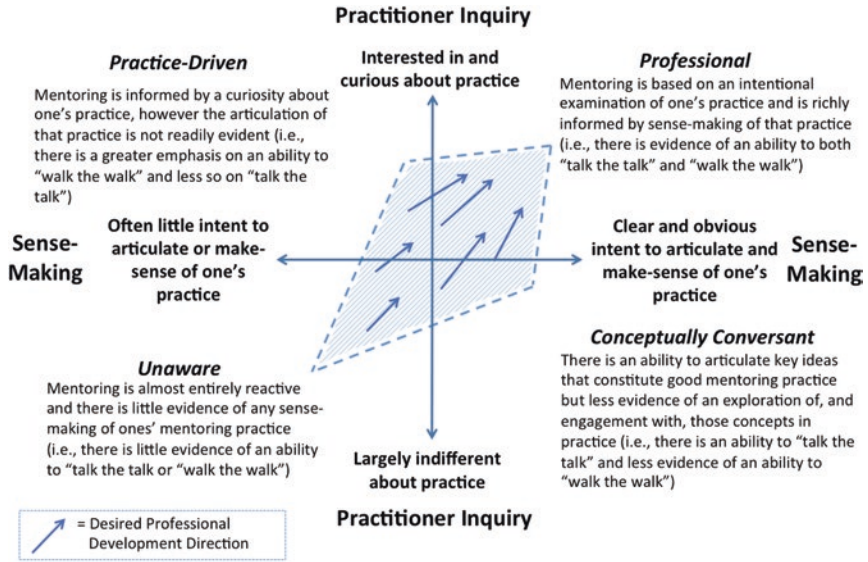
Practitioner Inquiry

Practice-Driven

Mentoring is informed by a curiosity about one's practice, however the articulation of that practice is not readily evident (i.e., there is a greater emphasis on an ability to "walk the walk" and less so on "talk the talk")

Interested in and curious about practice

Professional

Mentoring is based on an intentional examination of one's practice and is richly informed by sense-making of that practice (i.e., there is evidence of an ability to both "talk the talk" and "walk the walk")

Sense-Making

Often little intent to articulate or make-sense of one's practice

Clear and obvious intent to articulate and make-sense of one's practice

Sense-Making

Conceptually Conversant

There is an ability to articulate key ideas that constitute good mentoring practice but less evidence of an exploration of, and engagement with, those concepts in practice (i.e., there is an ability to "talk the talk" and less evidence of an ability to "walk the walk")

Unaware

Mentoring is almost entirely reactive and there is little evidence of any sense-making of ones' mentoring practice (i.e., there is little evidence of an ability to "talk the talk or "walk the walk")

Largely indifferent about practice

Practitioner Inquiry

= Desired Professional Development Direction

Fig. 2 The mentoring kite: revisited

Mirroring, Conversations, and Collaboration

As we reflected on the changes to the mentoring kite, we were reminded that six out of the eight TMs reported having to be convinced to become mentors when they were first approached to take on this role earlier in their careers. They felt, in all humility, that they were unqualified for the task. They believed that someone tasked with the role of mentor needed to be a master teacher with the appropriate skills. Once they agree to take on the role, they anticipated that they would be mentored in their new role but unfortunately found that they were largely left to their own devices. It was at this point in our analysis that we realized that we were no longer simply curious about "To what extent do TMs inquire into their practices and work with a knowledge base?" (which was the original framing of the research question). Rather, our focus shifted to a curiosity about the *ways in which* TMs conceive, develop, and carry out these professional descriptors of their practices (the wording of which is now reflected in the current framing of the research question). Two

interrelated notions characterize this 'play of ideas' for the mentors in this study: *mirroring* and *conversation*. These two notions revealed for us an even more significant outcome from this study: the essential role of *collaboration* between and among all parties. We now see this as a third critical dimension of mentoring as a professional practice.

Mirroring

In their role as gatekeepers of the profession, the TMs tried to help the TCs understand what is broadly considered appropriate practice and behavior for a beginning teacher. To do this, the TMs relied on the prompts and provocations from the TCs' own practicum experiences. In many instances, mirroring was used as the starting point for these discussions. For example, a video recording of the TC's lesson could be used as a mirror for the TCs to reflect upon their practice. Further, the TMs noted that their classroom observation notes also acted as mirrors to the TCs' practices. This practice of *mentoring by mirroring* rather than *teaching by telling* was important for the mentors in this study. However, when the TM provides a mirror for the TC, the TC still had to be aware of and consciously examine what they saw in 'the mirror.' The mirror does not merely replicate practice. Rather the viewer is involved in a reconstruction of practice, a type of sense-making, as they apprehend what they see in the mirror. Mentoring as mirroring emerged a powerful part of the mentors' practice in this study. For example, in the case of Christine:

Researcher: Again the mirror thing… that supportive element, that sounding board. In as much as there's mentoring going on, it's everybody kind of helping and mentoring everybody.

Christine: Yeah, because I often said, "Is it just me? Am I seeing things that are not happening? Am I being harsh? Am I being…" So it was really nice to have others have somewhat the same… [response/reaction]

However, as the TMs' use of mirroring prompted TC reflection, they also found that the TCs' reactions provoked the TMs to reflect on both their classroom teaching and their TC mentoring, for example:

Megan: As you're observing [the TC], you're thinking, "Oh, do I do that?" or "Do I say these things?" or "Do I have long pauses in that way?"

This complicates matters insofar as who is prompting reflection for whom. Similar to Schön's (1987) 'hall of mirrors,' participants continually shift their frame of reference "seeing it in its own terms and as a possible mirror of the interaction the [other] has brought" (p. 297). Ironically, TCs might be unaware of their potency in this regard perhaps because a common view of mentoring is of the TC as protégé and the TM as maître. Although this view of mentoring still exists in teacher education, it is gradually being supplanted by more collaborative and reciprocal understanding of the learning that takes place in practicum contexts (Holloway, 2001). Yet it bears mentioning again, but this time in terms of TMs, that the mentor must be willing to spot themselves in their observances of the TC, or else their mirroring effects are much diminished.

A second kind of reflection that arises from the notion of mirroring is a self-conscious awareness of responsibility that comes with being a mentor, which Christine expressed in the wake of her TC's decision to withdraw.

Christine: In some ways, I thought—you know, if someone was mirroring, or had a mirror on me, how would I be doing as an advisor? So I've been thinking a lot about that.

Not only was Christine already bearing the weight of responsibility for her TC's fate, Christine was now also considering, after the fact, her complicity in the outcome of her TC's withdrawal. More broadly, one suspects the mirror effect must stir TMs' memories of their own practicum experiences as well as empathy for the stress and anxiety that TCs inevitably feel in the practicum context. Taken together, self-awareness and self-consciousness on the part of a TM act as a check on the power dynamic embedded in the mentoring relationship.

Conversation

A significant observation arising from this study was the potency of conversation afforded by our presence as researchers. TMs noted that the research interviews provided a valuable, and otherwise rare, opportunity to talk about mentoring. Our initial intervention as researchers changed into a valuable interaction from the perspective of the TMs as there was a hunger for a conversation about mentoring (Henstrand, 2006). As the study unfolded, we found that our role as researchers (who were also part-time practicing teachers) positioned us at the conjunction of two different sorts of discourses; we were "involved in social constructions via interactions with the participants of the study and with intellectual colleagues that have helped formulate the framework being used in the study" (Albert et al., 2006, p. 83). This well describes our combined relationship with the eight TMs. Unexpected but nonetheless welcomed, the liminality of our position "[represented] neither this nor that but both and more" (Aronowitz et al., 2006, p. 64). This again invites the mirroring imagery as one's words and actions are seen in another's responses and reactions. Since conversations are generally informal and open-ended, the interlocutors must sustain intentional interest in the conversation as it unfolds. Observing that "no one knows in advance what will come out of a conversation" (p. 383), Gadamer (2004) suggests that the potentiality of a genuine conversation is its dynamic and unpredictable nature.

Within this liminal space lies an equalizing force that enables those involved in the conversation to lean in and out during their engagement with each other. As Wright (2015) describes, "the [one] interlocutor grasps the point of view of the other in order to bring it into relation with his own perspective" (p. 92). In this respect, Tracy (1998) reminds us that "we understand at all insofar as we understand differently" (p. 600) in the course of our interaction with others. The goal of what is learnt in this back and forth within mentoring contexts is "a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 304). Wright (2015) refers to this as a "*hermeneutic conversation* that… aims to find a common language and a shared understanding of a subject matter" (p. 92, original emphasis). What ultimately seems to matter about conversation is its organic authenticity, "[a]

process that puts the dialogue partners in the way of something that is not predetermined because it comes 'to us'… through the dialogue itself" (Arthos, 2008, p. 185). The TMs in this study mentioned that conversations such as ours were far from typical occurrences in their schools. That they might occur with university researchers who possessed a vested interest in their practice was a bonus from their perspective.
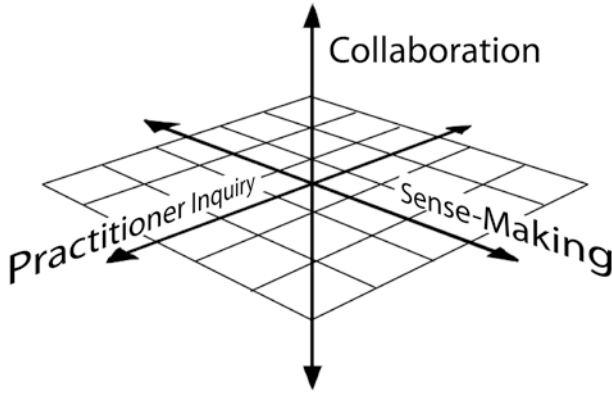
Collaboration

As we looked back over the study it became increasingly clear to us that, as intervenors in the practicum, the TMs viewed us not as researchers but as collaborators. For example, one TM extended an invitation to continue the conversation beyond the study:

Sam: You can come back next year if you like. It feels good. It's like a debrief time.

Being viewed as collaborators was probably the result of our use of semi-structured interviews. This data collection strategy allowed the TMs to have a sense of agency in our investigation of mentoring that might not have been possible with other more rigid data collection methods. Regardless, it was the sense of collaboration (i.e., working with each other in the best interest of the TCs) that emerged as significant in terms of how the TMs inquired into and made sense of their practice as they interacted with us. This sense of collaboration was so pronounced by the end of the study, that we felt it went beyond what could be captured in the two dimensions of the mentoring kite. Indeed, we now consider collaboration as something akin to a third axis in any consideration of mentoring as a professional practice (Fig. 3).

This notion of collaboration as an essential component of mentoring is something we look forward to exploring further as part of our ongoing research program with mentors in practicum settings.

Fig. 3 Collaboration: a third axis in conceptualizing mentoring as a professional practice

Final Word

As researchers, we set out to study mentoring by prompting TMs to articulate assumptions that underlie their practice as a first step to practitioner inquiry and from there to identify ways in which they drew upon and developed a knowledge base for mentoring. We deliberately approached the TMs in the most collegial way possible as a mark of respect for their professionalism and to allay any anxieties they might have about our intervention as university researchers. The results of our study offer a revised version of the mentoring kite that initially framed our study as one way of conceptualizing mentoring as a professional practice. Additionally, the notion of collaboration emerged as an important element of what and how the TMs made sense of their mentoring as they participated in the study. We offer both the revised mentoring kite and the notion of collaboration as two contributions in our attempt to make sense of mentoring as a professional practice in practicum contexts. We trust that these ideas will promote further discussion and debate in support of the important but sadly too often neglected work that mentors do in ensuring the future of the profession.

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