The SForD-TP Project: Promoting School-Based Mentoring in Initial Teacher Education at the University of Malta

Michael A. Buhagiar & Deborah A. Chetcuti

Department of Mathematics, Science and Technical Education

Faculty of Education

University of Malta

Emails: michael.buhagiar@um.edu.mt / deborah.chetcuti@um.edu.mt

The Background

The first instances of mentoring in the teaching profession – which eventually grew to cover all phases of teacher education (i.e., preservice, induction and continued professional development) – occurred in the early 1970s in the United States, followed closely by Europe (Kerry & Shelton Mayes, 1995). In the UK, in particular, the rapid growth in the early 1990s of school-based mentoring by teachers during initial teacher education (ITE) was propelled by a political decision to move the preparation of future teachers away from higher education (HE) and locate it in schools (Kerry & Shelton Mayes, 1995). Roughly at that time, Sultana (1995) made a plea to introduce mentoring in the ITE programmes organised by the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. His intention, however, was to recognise and utilise the situational expertise of teachers in schools rather than to eliminate ITE from HE (see Sultana, 1995). There was in fact one notable attempt in the early 1990s to move the Faculty in this direction with a mentoring programme designed for students specializing in primary education, but in spite of the largely positive results the initiative met a natural death when the requested support structures to sustain this programme failed to materialize (see Azzopardi & Bonnici, 2000). Since then, to the best of our knowledge, the Faculty has effectively continued to

marginalize or ignore what skilled and competent personnel in schools have to offer in the preparation of future teachers. That is until very recently.

The Faculty of Education is currently rethinking its two preservice teacher education programmes – that is, the four-year Bachelor of Education (Honours) and the one-year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses. As part of the ongoing discussions, the Faculty is actively seeking to improve the practicum component of these ITE programmes by introducing, among other things, an element of school-based mentoring. This development would represent an important shift in preservice teacher education in Malta. For the first time, teachers acting as mentors would start to play a central role in the preparation of future teachers (see Furlong & Maynard, 1995). While the Faculty continues to deliberate on the issue both internally and with key stake holders, some staff members have been gathering pertinent empirical evidence from at least two pilot projects in local schools. One of these projects has targeted Bachelor of Education (Honours) students specializing in primary education (see Farrugia, 2013). The other was our research project entitled *Strengthening the Formative Dimension of Teaching Practice through School-Based Mentoring* (SForD-TP) that focussed on PGCE students specializing in mathematics education.

The Faculty's decision to include a number of school placements in all ITE programmes reflects its belief that teachers-in-training should be provided with opportunities to acquire key professional skills and competencies, to link theory and practice, and to become reflective practitioners (see Sultana, 1995; Bezzina & Camilleri, 2001). For instance, the one-year PGCE programme, which served as the background to the SForD-TP project, has two teaching practice (TP) components: a three-week block during the first university semester and a six-week block during the second university semester. Throughout both TPs, student teachers – as Faculty students are better known in schools – normally assume full responsibility for the classes that they teach. The TP evaluation procedures give university tutors the chance to assess student teachers over a number of visits against what Brodin (2011) calls the 'reflective' and 'competence-based' learning paradigms. The first TP, which is formative in nature, is preceded by a mandatory 'school experience' (SE) of three weeks. During SE, the student teacher's role is to learn

about teaching and learning by assuming a reflective observational stance inside the classrooms of the teachers assigned by the school's senior management team. During the second TP, student teachers are assessed both formatively and summatively, a process that culminates in the award of a 'pass' or a 'fail' which is crucial step in the acquisition of their teaching qualification.

The Rationale

The SForD-TP project germinated from a number of concerns that we have regarding the manner in which SE and TP are being organized in the Faculty's two ITE programmes. The main ones being:

(i)   Student teachers are not necessarily observing good practices in schools during SE.

(ii)   As class teachers are not normally in class during TP, important professional decisions are being taken on a day-to-day basis solely by student teachers who lack proper and constant supervision.

(iii) Schools do not necessarily have the structures to guarantee that student teachers engage in supportive communities of practice during SE and TP.

(iv)   The expectation that university tutors offer both formative and summative feedback to student teachers during TP may create tensions in tutors that could weaken the formative dimension.

The desire to address these concerns, even if only partially, has led us to embrace and promote the notion of school-based mentoring in which the mentor acts as a 'critical friend', someone who "needs to be able to challenge the student [teachers] to re-examine their teaching, while at the same time providing encouragement and support" (Furlong & Maynard, 1995, p. 190). This positioning led us to develop the SForD-TP project that was implemented during the 2013-2014 academic year with the participation of the three student teachers who were enrolled in the Faculty's PGCE programme with specialization in mathematics education, three teacher mentors and one university tutor. The aim of the project was to explore if the introduction of school-based mentoring could help tackle, or

at least alleviate, our apprehensions regarding the mandatory periods that Faculty students spend in schools. We conjectured that it would for the following reasons:

First concern: Mentoring presupposes that the persons chosen to take student teachers under their wings during SE and TP are teachers who have mastered the profession (see Mattson, Eilertsen & Rorrison, 2011). Their subject and craft expertise would guarantee that student teachers actually get to observe good practices during SE.

Second concern: The mentor's ongoing, well-informed and reassuring presence in the student teacher's professional life during TP would create the space for immediate preventive or reparatory interventions, as and when required, that would help safeguard the interests of the students in class.

Third concern: Mentoring presumes regular dialogue between the mentor and his or her mentee that cuts across all aspects of professional activity during SE and TP. In the local school culture that is largely characterized by professional isolation (see, for instance, Buhagiar & Murphy, 2008), this experience would offer student teachers the chance to initiate their journey of becoming reflective practitioners within what Lave and Wenger (1991) call 'communities of practice'.

Fourth concern: Although it is possible to assign different assessment roles to different university tutors (see, for instance, Chetcuti & Buhagiar, 2014), mentoring ensures that when university tutors are expected to provide both formative and summative feedback, the student teacher has at least one person, the mentor, who can focus completely on the formative dimension provided that this individual is not also involved in the formal evaluation process (see Portner, 2008).

Strengthened by these convictions, we set out to develop a school-based mentoring experience for the PGCE mathematics students that builds upon the Faculty's commitment to link SE and TP to the acquisition of teaching competencies and engagement in reflective practice. Reflection led us towards Maynard and Furlong's (1995) proposal to integrate

what are generally considered to be the three main models of mentoring – that is, the 'apprenticeship model', the 'competency model' and the 'reflective model' – as this would compensate for the partiality and inadequacy of each single model. Taken together, on the contrary, these models would guarantee that student teachers have mentors in schools who can act as models and interpreters of essential teaching skills, who can contribute in their training to develop teaching competencies, and who can help them to reflect critically on their practices (see Maynard & Furlong, 1995).

The Design, Implementation and Data Collection

During the first university semester, just a few weeks after the initiation of their studies, PGCE students have a three-week SE that is followed by a three-week TP experience which is intended primarily to support their professional growth through formative assessment. This back-to-back scheduling of SE and TP fitted well our intention to model the project on Maynard and Furlong's (1995) proposal that the class teacher assumes three mentoring roles that blend in together over the whole experience, albeit with different emphasis from time to time. To facilitate this process, the project was purposely designed to soften and blur the current dichotomy between how teachers and student teachers normally act during SE and TP. Starting with SE, instead of expecting student teachers to learn simply by observing the teacher in class and reflecting on these observations, the project promoted the idea that the teacher and student teacher should explore together how the student teacher can assume a more active and supporting role throughout this phase of the school placement period. Then during TP, when the teaching responsibility passes from the teacher to the student teacher, the project expected that the teacher, contrary to normal practice, remains in class to support the student teacher in ways to be determined through discussion and mutual agreement. In relation to Maynard and Furlong's (1995) integrated model of mentoring, the SE phase as proposed in the project sees the teacher primarily involved in the guiding role of 'master' who articulates and presents 'recipes' that work to his or her 'apprentice'. In the next phase, during TP, the project offers the teacher, who remains a model for his or her mentee, more chance to coach the student teacher towards achieving an agreed level of teaching competencies and also to become a co-inquirer with the student teacher as they think critically about the unfolding teaching and learning scenario inside the classroom.

Once the design of the SForD-TP project was finalized and documented, we turned our attention to obtaining ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) and approval and collaboration from three crucial gate keepers. These were the Faculty's Office of Professional Practice which co-ordinates the placement of student teachers in schools, the Directorates of Education that are responsible for all state schools in Malta, and the Faculty's mathematics area co-ordinator who organizes the visits made by university tutors to student teachers teaching mathematics. The participants were only identified and approached once the number of PGCE mathematics students, three in fact, became known at the start of the academic year. The decision to focus on PGCE mathematics students was based on two considerations. First, mathematics education is the area of specialization of Michael, the co-ordinator of the SForD-TP project (Deborah's area of specialization is science education). And second, as the one-year duration of their PGCE course coincided with his sabbatical year, the students knew that should they decline to participate, neither one of us could in any way influence the course of their studies. Given that we had planned to have one teacher mentor for each student teacher, their acceptance necessitated that we contact three mathematics teachers who had been recommended to us by a number of trusted persons. These teachers were considered to be suitable for the project because, as argued by Edwards and Townsend (2014), in addition to their teaching experience and the resulting teaching craft knowledge, they appeared to possess mentoring craft knowledge that is characterized by an individual's ability to reflect on one's own mentoring experiences. All three teachers, who happened to be posted in three different state secondary schools, agreed to participate. In agreement with the mathematics area co-ordinator, it was decided later that one university tutor, who also accepted to participate, would conduct the two mandatory TP visits to each of the three student teachers in the project.

Introductory meetings were organized with all the participants before the start of the PGCE students' school placement: while one-to-one meetings were held with the three teachers and the university tutor, one of us held a group meeting with the three student teachers. Apart from serving the purpose of obtaining informed consent from all participants, which included guarantees of confidentiality, these meetings highlighted the exploratory scope of the project and informed participants how this would affect their

participation. It was emphasised with the teachers and student teachers that each pair of mentor and mentee was expected to negotiate between themselves the exact delineations of their participation. Likewise, the university tutor was given a free hand how to conduct the 'normal' assessment duties within the project's overarching structure. We were of the idea that by giving participants the possibility to explore roles and actions within a basic mentoring framework, this project would stand a better chance to serve as a guide to professional action culminating in the introduction of a Faculty-wide mentoring scheme that is agreeable to all stakeholders. Towards this end, we set out to collect data that would permit us to come up with what Bassey (2001) calls 'fuzzy predictions' that replace the certainty of scientific generalizations by the uncertainty, or fuzziness, of statements that contain qualifiers which are linked directly to the actual circumstances of the research.

As agreed with the Directorates of Education, the three student teachers in the project were assigned by the schools' senior management teams to one of the three pre-selected teacher mentors at the beginning of their six-week school placement period. In reality though, in view of the Faculty's SE and TP regulations, the student teachers only got to experience directly three of their mentor's mathematics classes, which led to a total of 15 lessons per week. The research data was collected through classroom observations and subsequent qualitative interviews in order to get first-hand insights into what was happening inside the classrooms before confronting the protagonists of the project about their experiences and perspectives. Each mentor-mentee pair was observed on one occasion during the SE phase and on two occasions during the TP phase, and a report was compiled after each visit. The interviews were conducted after the end of TP. We prepared three parallel interview guides – one for the teachers, one for the student teachers and one for the university tutor – and after going through the questions at length with the participants, we invited them to send us their written responses within an agreed timeframe. After reading and reflecting on their written comments, all the participants were invited to a second one-to-one meeting during which we asked for clarifications, probed further into their responses and put forward additional questions. In addition to this, the three student teachers were invited to a focus group interview after the end of their second TP which stretched over a six-week period during the second university semester. The idea was to shed further light on the issue of school-based mentoring by exploring how the

participation of student teachers in the project impacted on their performance during the second TP that, unlike the first one, carries a decisive summative component.

The Initial Stages of Data Analysis and Preliminary Results

The classroom observations and the accompanying informal conversations with the teachers and student teachers during the school visits, which preceded the 'official' interviewing phase of the project, suggested that all six mentors and mentees were committed to engage genuinely in their 'experimentation' with mentoring. Moreover, most of what we saw and heard up till then, including information provided by the university tutor, made us hope that the project's eventual results would be rather encouraging. This is how Deborah, who at that time was also visiting the PGCE science students in schools, recalled this early positive feeling that we shared as co-researchers:

> I believe that the constant support provided by the mentor teacher made a
> difference for the maths students giving them the experience, the expertise
> and the confidence to make their TP a formative and constructive experience.
> The science students did learn but it was a slower process, a less certain one,
> and a more lonely one. (Chetcuti, 2013)

This sense of positivity continued to prevail as the interview data started to come in. At the time of writing this project report, however, the 'proper' data analysis was still in its initial stages. Using the thematic approach advocated by Boyatzis (1998), we have reached the stage where the data are being coded and the themes are starting to emerge. Although four specific concerns on our part triggered off the project, the ongoing analysis is leading to new, unforeseen avenues as is common with qualitative research that purposely refuses to predetermine at the start of a study the exact information to be sought and recorded. Still, in recognition that the data analysis is not yet finalised, we choose to limit ourselves here to revisiting briefly our initial concerns in view of the SForD-TP project experience.

First concern: exposure to good practices

The classroom observations and comments made by the university tutor indicated that the careful selection of mentors in the project was reaping the desired results. On our

part, we could see that the student teachers were in the hands of teachers who are experienced, competent, committed to teaching and willing to share their knowledge and expertise with persons who are making the first steps into the profession. And the university tutor was of the opinion that the project's ambience had influenced very positively the professional growth and practices of student teachers. The follow-up interviews with the student teachers confirmed these impressions. The student teachers concurred that they had learned a lot about lesson planning, teaching and learning, lesson evaluation and classroom management both during the SE phase when they were supporting the teacher and during the TP phase when the teacher was supporting them. This finding suggests that the teachers' continued presence in class makes it possible for them to act as models for student teachers even when the latter are responsible for teaching. Overall, the data suggest that school-based mentoring has the potential to expose student teachers to good teaching and continued support throughout their permanence in schools. Moreover, there are also indications that the benefits of mentoring for student teachers can go beyond the specific mentoring period to guide and illuminate their future teaching experiences.

Second concern: continuous monitoring of student teachers

The teachers' presence in class during the TP phase guaranteed that student teachers would always be in the presence of a warranted professional who could oversee their actions and intervene if necessary. The observations suggested that this monitoring was being done profitably and in most cases very discretely. It later emerged from the interviews with the student teachers that this measure, which was meant primarily to protect the interests of the young students in class, permitted them to have almost instant, quality feedback on an ongoing basis. They concurred that the 'after lesson' feedback, which frequently started as they walked with the teacher from the classroom to the staffroom, was extremely useful. But there was still some concern about this aspect of the project. One student teacher remarked, for instance, that the continued presence of the teacher led to some role confusions among the students in class, especially in the first week or so. Classroom management was another area of concern among student teachers. While one of them felt somewhat restricted by the teacher's presence in class, there was general consensus among them that a student teacher might not know if he or she could actually

manage a class on his or her own. In view of this, they recommended that future mentoring programmes would allow for periods of time when student teachers are left completely on their own in class. A similar proposal was made by the teacher mentors who basically argued that student teachers need to be given the space to develop a teaching identity in a way that does not question their ability to teach independently of the presence of the mentor in class. As it happened, in the last week of TP two student teachers had to teach without the mentor in class, as one teacher mentor was sick and another had volunteered to take over the teaching of a colleague who was sick. Interestingly enough, although this development was in line with their suggestion that student teachers should be given opportunities to be on their own in class, both claimed to miss the constructive feedback provided by their mentor.

Third concern: participating in a community of practice

All the teachers and student teachers in the project reported that they had built a very good relationship with their respective mentor or mentee over the six-week period of the school placement. During our school visits, some even confided that they would miss this professional relationship once the placement period was over. All the data suggest moreover that, albeit with varying levels of intensity and success, each pair of mentor and mentee in the project had managed to create a small community that essentially plans, implements and evaluates things together. Although originally designed to support student teachers as they enter schools and engage in their first teaching experiences, there are indications that mentoring could also benefit teachers acting as mentors. The teachers in the project commented in fact that mentoring had given them the opportunity to reflect on their practices and provided the space where professional actions could be discussed in a friendly and non-threatening environment. This spirit of co-inquiry – which is so essential to develop communities of practice – was also evident during the end-of-lesson feedback sessions with the university tutor. The data indicate that the tutor's decision to give feedback to student teachers in the presence of their mentor often resulted in a three-way discussion that highlighted strengths and sought remedies to weaknesses. But the level of success of these communities appears to be greatly linked to the level of comfort and trust that develops among the protagonists and the attitude with which different individuals approach the situation. Comments made by all the participants suggest that finding the

'right match' among each nucleus of mentors, mentees and university tutors could prove crucial for the success or otherwise of a school-based mentoring project.

Fourth concern: strengthening formative assessment

Given that the first TP of PGCE students is formative in nature, the SForD-TP project was not the ideal setting to explore if school-based mentoring can help sustain the formative dimension of assessment when summative concerns are also present. Still, the project's data shed important insights, even if indirectly, on this issue. In the project, although both the teachers and the university tutor had formative roles, there was one important distinction which we tried to blur – without much success, as it turned out. This had to do with the fact that university tutors are obliged to record each of their visits by ticking against a list of competencies and writing comments on the student teachers' TP evaluation booklets (see *Teaching Practice Handbook*, 2002). In agreement with the Faculty's Office of Professional Practice, we invited the teacher mentors to write a comment on these booklets regarding the student teacher's overall experience during the school placement. They were meant to write this comment at the end of the student teacher's school placement. While our intention was to value the teachers' professional knowledge and opinions, they might have construed acceding to our request as getting involved in the formal evaluation process. Their apparent reluctance to play a formal evaluative role could have germinated from the knowledge that the TP evaluation booklets are official records that might carry unintended long-term consequences for student teachers, especially when it comes to job opportunities. For the record, only one teacher obliged our request; of the remaining two teachers, one claimed to be unaware of the request and the other chose to write the comments on a separate sheet of paper.

On their part, the student teachers seemed to distinguish between their mentor and university tutor, even if both had a formative role to play. For while the mentors were largely seen as persons with whom one could be completely honest, the university tutor was attributed a more formal and distant role. This could have happened in view of the permanence of the tutor comments on the TP evaluation booklets and due to the possibility that the same university tutor would assess them during the second and final TP, which practically determines whether or not they have the necessary minimum qualities and skills

to become teachers. This distinction was most accentuated when one student teacher expressed relief that the mentor was present when the university tutor was giving the 'after lesson' feedback. According to this student teacher, the mentor acted on that day as an interpreter of the classroom situation for the benefit of the university tutor, leading in the process to a better understanding of what had been observed and to a fairer assessment.

In their totality, these findings suggest two interrelated things. First, what the Faculty presents as a formative experience may be perceived quite differently by other actors. In particular, the realization that student teachers could hold back from of a university tutor who only has a formative role makes us wonder what could happen when the tutor has both formative and summative roles. And second, having a school-based mentor without a formal evaluative role seems to strengthen the formative dimension of school placements. For there are indications that the continued presence of such a mentor encourages student teachers to open up, seek help and work towards improving their practices within a trusting and collaborative relationship that is devoid of fears or inhibitions.

Conclusion

Overall, the data suggest that the introduction of school-based mentoring along the lines suggested in our project can go a long way to address at least some of the more pressing issues highlighted in our four concerns. In this sense, the lessons learnt from the SForD-TP project could contribute towards the Faculty's ongoing efforts aimed at improving the quality of the school placement experience for its students. But while our small-scale project certainly signals positive prospects, much still remains to be clarified and done if mentoring is to be considered as a doable and sustainable option that the Faculty could and should take on across the board. Some of the considerations that readily come to mind include: the 'when' and 'how' of mentoring; the availability, selection and training of mentors; the recognition and compensation of mentors; the 'in class' and 'out class' interactions among mentors, student teachers and tutors; building bridges with schools and other stake holders; and the logistical structures and resources that are needed to set up a full-blown mentoring programme. And the list can go on. Thus, while we feel energized and confident by the positive experience of our project, we are conscious that

ours is 'complex hope' as it represents "an optimism of the will that recognizes the historical and structural difficulties which have to be overcome" (Grace, 1994, p. 57). We say this in the conviction that although there are many types of barriers to be overcome, the Faculty can hardly aspire to improve its preservice provision unless mentoring, under some form or other, becomes an integral part of its ITE programmes.

Acknowledgements

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