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## Associate Teachers' views on dialogic mentoring

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine Associate Teachers' (ATs) views on dialogic mentoring. More specifically it considers the views of 48 ATs who were involved in an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) partnership that has emerged in response to several changes that have occurred in Welsh education. Educational reforms in Wales have highlighted the value of mentoring and the new ITE partnership is uniquely committed to a dialogic approach. A questionnaire and three focus group interviews were used to generate data from the 48 ATs who were completing a one-year postgraduate programme. Thematic analysis was then used to interrogate the data and identify patterns of response. Adopting a dialogic approach was found to remove some of the anxiety around formal observations and help establish trusting collaborative relationships where ATs were willing to take risks. The dialogic approach was more democratic and gave ATs a stronger voice, but this also created some conflict as mentors' own beliefs were more likely to be questioned. The dialogic approach relied on mentors being fully invested in the process and being committed to open conversations about learning.

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### KEYWORDS

dialogic mentoring; associate teachers; learning conversations; initial teacher education

## Introduction

This research is set within the context of an ITE partnership that was created between two universities and other key stakeholders. The partnership emerged in response to a series of changes in Welsh education that included the publication of a new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2019), the adoption of new professional standards for teaching and leadership (Welsh Government, 2018b) and a new accreditation process that required higher education institutions to collaborate with partnership schools in the design, construction and delivery of ITE programmes (Furlong, 2015; Welsh Government, 2018a).

The core aim of the ITE partnership is to enable the ATs (also referred to as trainee or pre-service teachers) to become 'creative, inspiring and highly skilled teachers' who will contribute to the teaching of a new curriculum for Wales (Griffiths et al., 2020, p. 201). The model is centred on the class/subject mentor and the critical role that they play in the development of ATs (Jones et al., 2020). Indeed, educational reform in Wales has raised the importance of mentoring and has led to it being identified as a key element in the professional development of all teachers (Furlong, 2015). Thus, the ITE partnership prioritised this area and established

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a mentor development group, made up of academics and teachers from contributing schools. Their remit was to talk with other professionals within the partnership and use this consultation, along with a review of wider research, to decide how the mentoring role should be conceptualised (Griffiths et al., 2020). The mentor development group drew on Malderez's (2001, p. 57) work and defined mentoring as 'the support given by one (usually more experienced) person for the growth and learning of another, and for their integration into and acceptance by a specific community'. Moreover, they described effective mentoring as being a 'two-way process that develops a reflective approach to learning through the key processes of collaboration, dialogue, observation, critical reflection and enquiry' (Griffiths et al., 2020, p. 211).

The ethos within the partnership is to promote a critical approach where ATs participate in dialogue with their mentors and tutors, question their own and others teaching practices and demonstrate their capacity to engage with new developments in pedagogical research (Griffiths et al., 2020). The belief is that ATs should begin a process of developing their own teaching through critical reflection and enquiry. To facilitate this process the partnership provides regular opportunities for the ATs to engage in professional dialogue with their mentors, tutors and peers. This collaborative approach will seemingly influence the ATs' existing teaching while also preparing them for ongoing professional learning, where they will be able to work with others and develop their professional understanding in response to new developments in pedagogical research.

The most important aspect, in the context of this research, is that mentors in the ITE partnership were encouraged to use dialogic approaches. The Mentor Handbook noted in its introductory paragraph that their vision for mentoring was dialogic at heart (CaBan, 2019). This approach ostensibly put the theory of dialogic mentoring into practice and provided a rare opportunity to evaluate its impact. As such, the overarching aim of this study was to analyse the perceptions of ATs, who were completing a one-year postgraduate programme in either primary or secondary education, to understand the impact of this approach on their development as teachers. This paper continues by examining the research literature that relates to monological and dialogical mentoring (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000), before analysing the dialogic approach adopted by the ITE partnership.

## Monological and dialogical mentoring

The complex and dynamic nature of the relationships and interactions that are involved in mentoring mean that while it has become more significant within ITE in Wales, it remains a difficult process to understand (Nahmad-Williams & Taylor, 2015). Bokeno and Gantt (2000) have provided two models that help make sense of the relationships and interactions that take place between the mentor and the mentee (the AT) and conceive mentoring as being either monological or dialogical in its nature.

When following a monological approach, the mentor is positioned as an expert who uses predetermined criteria to assess progress and provide feedback as they direct a novice towards a clearly defined goal (Nahmad-Williams & Taylor, 2015). Aspects of this approach can be seen within ITE during a formal lesson observation where the mentor observes the AT's lesson and uses a standardised form to identify what they perceive to be the AT's strengths and areas for development. The mentor's written

commentary enables transient features of teaching and learning to be captured and used by the AT to demonstrate their progress against the teacher standards (Welsh Government, 2018b). The performative nature of ITE necessitates the systematic assessment of ATs and the teacher standards are the criteria that are used to grade and provide feedback to ATs. In this model the mentor uses formal lesson observations to monitor progress and direct the AT towards solutions that enable them to develop different aspects of their teaching.

The monological mentoring approach is thought to be useful in solving the ATs' immediate problems, particularly in relation to lesson organisation and the management of pupils' behaviour (Wang & Odell, 2002). It provides novice ATs with access to more immediately useful feedback as it is based on explicit criteria and is directed towards clearly defined aims (James & Pollard, 2011). Indeed, lesson feedback that is limited to fewer and more specific aspects of teaching is thought to allow for deeper levels of analysis (Hudson, 2015). That said, this form of feedback can direct ATs to simply replicate the prevailing and dominant models of teaching and learning (Nahmad-Williams & Taylor, 2015). Moreover, it positions ATs as more passive recipients of information, where one-way conversations about solutions allow less space for reflection and innovative thinking (Jones et al., 2019). A hierarchical, expert-novice model can also lead to what Hobson (2016) termed 'judgementoring' where ongoing evaluation and related discussions about competence cause anxiety and lead to tension in the relationship between the mentor and the AT.

Initially, mentors typically adopt a monological approach (Jones et al., 2019) where scheduled lesson observations are used to review progress against predetermined criteria. That said, successful mentors also adapt their approach to the AT's developing ability to reflect on more complex aspects of teaching (Van Ginkel et al., 2015). As the placement progresses, they prompt ATs to consider the different aspects of their teaching and assess the impact that this has had on pupil learning. Jones et al. (2019) identify this aspect of professional learning to be the basis of self-regulation as an accurate assessment of pupil learning informs the ATs' own understanding of how to teach effectively. Successful mentors are able to adapt to the needs of the AT (Van Ginkel et al., 2015) and draw on a range of strategies to promote their pedagogical knowledge (Hudson, 2013). While monological approaches tend to dominate initial interactions, over the course of a placement, mentors do tend to move towards a more dialogical two-way approach where understanding is co-constructed through open and authentic learning conversations (Jones et al., 2018).

When mentors adopt a dialogical approach (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000) they are reframing the relationship with the AT by moving away from an expert-novice model that positions the AT as a more passive recipient of knowledge. In a dialogic model the mentor and the AT develop more of a collaborative and reciprocal partnership that promotes reflection and open two-way discussion about relevant aspects of pedagogy (Wang & Odell, 2002). Mentors are not delivering knowledge to the AT but are now working with them to promote inquiry and extend their shared understanding (Nahmad-Williams & Taylor, 2015). In this way a dialogic approach is distinct from the formal criterion-based lesson observation where a standardised form is used to assess progress against predetermined criteria. When adopting a dialogical approach mentors engage in

more spontaneous learning conversations that flow from what has happened in the lesson itself.

The dialogical mentoring approach is valued by ATs and mentors as authentic learning conversations are thought to strengthen relationships, stimulate thinking and extend understanding (Jones et al., 2019; Sheridan & Young, 2016). According to Bokeno and Gantt (2000) effective dialogic mentoring is built on authentic learning conversations, where the mentor and AT are both willing to engage in reflection, share their thinking and learn from the other (Nahmad-Williams & Taylor, 2015). Less is known about the unintended outcomes of a dialogic approach, but the conversations that follow a lesson are thought to be more inconsistent as feedback is more variable during open observations where there is no clear focus (Hudson, 2015). More formal lesson observations may provide a deeper level of specific analysis, but dialogic approaches do move the focus away from evaluative ‘judgementoring’ and towards less daunting interactions (Hobson, 2016; Jones et al., 2018). Indeed, ATs viewed informal everyday conversations about teaching to be as important to their development as conventional feedback from lesson observations (Jones et al., 2018). The dialogic approach helps secure the mutual engagement of the mentor and the AT in an ongoing joint enterprise where resources and ideas are shared (Jones et al., 2019; Sheridan & Young, 2016).

### **Mentoring in the ITE partnership**

A review of ITE in Wales (Furlong, 2015) was part of an overhaul of education that led to the creation of the new partnership. The review noted the inability of Welsh ITE to develop teachers who were able to meet the contemporary demands of education (Furlong, 2015). In addition, Estyn’s (2018) report similarly highlighted limitations in ITE and cited inconsistencies in the effectiveness of mentors and variations in the professional learning opportunities provided to ATs. The expectation within previous university ITE programmes in Wales was for mentors to assess the progress of ATs against the professional standards through a formal weekly observation of their teaching. The standards are the benchmark for accredited ITE and outline the professional skills, knowledge and behaviours that ATs must demonstrate in order to gain Qualified Teacher Status. The new ITE partnership still uses the standards to ensure a degree of accountability, but there is also a greater emphasis on widening the professional opportunities of ATs so they are regularly involved in dialogue rather than merely being passive recipients of knowledge (Griffiths et al., 2020). In this way, only eight formal lesson observations are completed during the one-year programme, but this is balanced against a range of more formative methods of providing feedback, including the use of informal lesson feedback, reflective journals, lesson plans and evaluations. The overall assessment of the ATs only occurs once in each of the two school placements and is informed by a wide range of sources that collectively demonstrate the AT’s progress against the standards.

To combat the potential for a ‘judgementoring’ approach, the partnership not only limit the number of formal lesson observations to eight, but also emphasise the role of the mentor in establishing supportive relationships and supervising through constructive feedback and listening. The Mentor Handbook (CaBan, 2019) acknowledges that the many and varied roles of the mentor include being an assessor. They recognise the tension between assessing and supporting and stress that assessments should be

approached positively so that the mentor is seen to be a critical friend. Finally, the Mentor Handbook (CaBan, 2019) describes the post-lesson observation process as one that should be led by the AT where possible, so that they can share their reflections in response to the questions prepared by the mentor.

In this way the mentor development group have moved the ITE partnership away from monological approaches. There are seemingly still be aspects of this model with the inclusion of formal lesson observations, but they do occur less frequently and will, it is claimed, aim to include a more dialogic approach to post lesson feedback. Overall, the mentoring model used in the partnership has been developed to place greater emphasis on dialogue with the AT rather than on some of the administrative processes that are often associated with the role. As such, the mentor is expected to meet weekly with the AT to discuss progress and set targets (CaBan, 2019). They are also encouraged to collaborate with ATs to design and teach lessons and to engage in regular professional dialogue that promotes shared understanding (Jones et al., 2019).

## Methodology

The aim of the paper is to analyse the ATs' views on the effectiveness of the dialogic approach. To this end, a total of 48 ATs, from a whole cohort of 201, took part in the study during the final phase of their one-year postgraduate teacher education programme. The ATs were all working with mentors in primary or secondary schools that were affiliated with the partnership in the North of Wales. 25 of the ATs were trained to teach in secondary education, while the other 23 were doing the same in the primary age phase. The selection of ATs was based on a purposive sample where potential participants were included or excluded based on their relevance to the purposes of the study (Denscombe, 2017). In this case, the ATs were included as they were all training to teach as part of the ITE partnership. They were all immersed in teacher education and were well placed to share their experiences of, and views on, a dialogic mentoring approach. This sampling strategy allowed the researchers to develop understanding from the perspectives of the ATs and it was thought to be a particularly useful means of investigating the impact of the dialogic mentoring approach adopted by the partnership (Bryman, 2012). All participants provided appropriate informed consent and ethical approval for the study was gained from the University of Chester Faculty of Education and Children's Services Ethics Committee (Reference: 12,220 CaBan Project) on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2020.

The study used questionnaires and focus group interviews with the ATs to gather data on their perceptions of dialogic mentoring. The questionnaires were completed by all 48 ATs with the option provided to respond in English or through the medium of the Welsh. The questionnaires allowed the respondents to work independently and record their answers to clear and easily analysed questions (Denscombe, 2017). While questionnaires are easy to administer and offer a convenient means of generating data, the respondents may not have understood the questions properly or replied with sufficient clarity or detail (Denscombe, 2017). As such, three focus group interviews, with four ATs in each group, were also undertaken at the end of the programme. This provided an opportunity for the ATs to reflect on their initial responses and provide further insight into their personal experiences and perceptions. Focus group interviews are a well-established means of generating qualitative data. They allow participants to exchange viewpoints and discuss



different experiences and can be used to confirm and add to previous analysis (Bryman, 2012). Revisiting the interview data through focus group interviews, enhanced the credibility of the findings and allowed for rich descriptions to emerge (Denscombe, 2017). That said, the use of focus group interviews does create a problem of comparing non-standard responses as the analysis of data is more complex (Bryman, 2012). In this study, the focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and organised alongside the initial data from the questionnaires. A process of thematic analysis was then used to identify themes in the data.

Thematic analysis is frequently used within qualitative research and is described as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It is a flexible approach that can generate unanticipated insights, highlight similarities and differences, and provide a detailed and nuanced account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used in this research as an appropriate method for analysing the experiences and perspectives of the research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was also adopted as it is a useful qualitative method to use when working in research teams to examine larger sets of qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, each member of the research team read and coded the data to identify relevant features that could be clustered into themes. The themes were then reviewed collaboratively to test interpretations and clarify their content. The following sections examine the themes that were found in the data, with individual ATs identified by a number (AT1-AT48) reflecting their place in the sequence of questionnaires.

## Continuity and change

Mentoring has been identified as a key element of educational reform in Wales (Furlong, 2015). It is believed that effective mentoring will help create outstanding teachers and establish a culture of professional learning in schools (Griffiths et al., 2020). When talking about the process of effective mentoring ATs highlighted the value of having clear targets and strategies and the value of ongoing and constructive dialogue. The former was evident in relation to the formal lesson observations that are well established part of ITE; *‘Having targets to hit during the observation lesson was extremely useful as it provided focus. Otherwise feedback would have been too ambiguous, without any guidelines’* (AT1). The formal lesson observation is thought to provide more explicit and immediately useful feedback (James & Pollard, 2011) while a more discursive approach to feedback can lack some clarity (Hudson, 2015). That said, almost all ATs valued and preferred the less formal dialogic aspect of their work with mentors; *‘I found the structured form resulted in less useful feedback, it was the informal in the moment feedback from mentors that really developed me most’* (AT31).

The main benefit of the change to a more dialogic approach was that it avoided the anxiety associated with regular formal assessments. ‘Judgementoring’ is the term Hobson (2016) used to explain how an AT’s professional learning can be impeded by ongoing evaluations of their teaching. In the partnership most ATs admitted that they experienced some anxiety in the build up to the formal lesson observations that were scheduled to take place eight times in the year. A small number of ATs experienced a more debilitating level of anxiety; *‘I found them stressful as I felt like I was being judged. When I did have a formal observation, it made me so anxious and stressed. I didn’t find this helpful as I felt I could not give my best as I felt too much pressure’* (AT26).



The new dialogic approach adopted by the partnership meant that ATs had far fewer formal observations, with the focus being placed instead on regular and more informal conversations about learning. This approach produced some unforeseen outcomes. The everyday dialogic feedback with the mentor seemed to lower the levels of anxiety associated with the formal lesson observations as ATs were already accustomed to being involved in discussions about their teaching. One AT noted that; *‘with almost all my lessons being observed in one format or another . . . when the formal observation took place, I felt there was less pressure’* (AT1). Another AT similarly explained that; *‘When your mentor is providing regular feedback, the formal lesson observations serve as a formality’* (AT25). Regular low stakes dialogic feedback seemingly prepared ATs to have more detailed discussions about their teaching.

The experience of engaging in everyday dialogue about teaching and learning seemed to seep into the formal observations where lesson feedback followed the same discursive pattern. *‘In my opinion they did not differ too much from regular lessons’* (AT17). Mentors were expected to formally observe and evaluate ATs’ teaching, but the feedback that followed could be more of a two-way discussion about the lesson, rather than the mentor simply providing information to the AT (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). The emphasis on regular informal learning conversations between the AT and mentor meant that feedback from formal observations also tended to follow a similarly dialogic, rather than monologic pattern. One AT summed this up this in saying that; *‘The formal lesson observations were a good way of gaining a more in-depth evaluation of the lesson. They were always a bit nerve-wracking, but I always felt happy afterwards as I’d had time to sit with the mentor and discuss what had happened’* (AT45).

### Dialogic mentoring and democratic learning

When mentors adopted a dialogic approach lesson feedback became more of a shared learning conversation where ATs also had the opportunity to express their views. One AT noted *‘they would discuss the outcomes with me, allowing me to say how I felt it went first. They always asked my opinion on their evaluations and whether I thought it was fair and just, which I really liked’* (AT7). Moreover, adopting this approach seemingly promoted a view that knowledge of teaching is socially constructed through the experiences of all participants (Coffield, 2008) and that as such the ATs’ views also counted; *‘I felt valued during planning meetings, my ideas and contributions were often taken on board and utilised’* (AT32). ATs were asked for their own views on their own teaching and on broader departmental or school approaches. In doing so ATs felt as if they were treated as teachers; *‘These chats were very helpful, they always made me feel like part of the department, like my opinions and the way I was teaching were valid. They always treated me fairly and like I just fit in’* (AT37).

The partnership aimed to help ATs develop their professional identity as teachers and support them in establishing their own beliefs and values in relation to teaching (Griffiths et al., 2020). Adopting a dialogic approach helped achieve this aim as it is a method founded on shared discussions where both participants are encouraged to collaborate and contribute to conversations about learning (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). In this way, ATs were encouraged to develop their own professional identity through a continual process of enquiry, where they were supported to question and reflect on existing practices and to try and implement new ideas (Griffiths et al., 2020).

According to Hoffman et al. (2015), the relationship between the mentor and AT can provide the emotional support needed for more risk taking. One AT explained that she *'felt confident to give things a go and not worry if they didn't go to plan, because my mentor was there to support me'* (AT2). This approach seemingly developed the ATs' confidence and reduced their fear of failing; *'they were all positive, encouraging, warm and supportive this made a space that allowed for mistakes to happen that could be adjusted for'* (AT31). The support for ATs to develop their own professional agency was not always evident. One AT noted that, *'I felt I could never really do anything to please her . . . she had a way of doing things and she liked things done that way. This sometimes made it hard for me and meant I adopted her way of teaching rather than my own style'* (AT8). That said, most mentors embraced the dialogic approach and allowed the ATs to peripherally participate in enacting their own emerging philosophical stances. In this way, the mentors shared their expertise and their own understanding of effective teaching, while also allowing the AT to explore what this meant for their own personal practice (Payne, 2018). The mentors who adopted this approach and created opportunities for ATs to find their own ways of teaching effectively were valued by ATs, with one explaining that he had learnt most when, *'my mentors allowed me to teach in my own way and figure things out for myself—with some questioning about how I felt things went and what I wanted to change'* (AT27).

The ATs' agentic professional identities were seemingly nurtured through a continual process of dialogue and enquiry. The monological approach was somewhat limited in this regard as it is based on the AT reproducing the mentor's existing ideas rather than promoting more creative acts. In contrast the dialogic approach was far more democratic, it allowed ATs to have their say. Adopting a dialogic model repositioned the AT in their relationship with their mentor as an emerging teacher whose contribution to understanding learning was also valued. Overall, the dialogic approach adopted by the ITE partnership was seemingly more democratic in its nature as it promoted a participatory and social approach to education (Coffield, 2008).

## Collaboration and conflict

ATs referred to the experience of teaching, with the support of their mentor, as the most important aspect of their learning in ITE (Clarke et al., 2014). That said, it was not merely the experience of teaching that informed their understanding of how to teach and be a teacher, but the opportunities that they had to learn from experience; *'I learnt most from teaching the students and then reflecting with my mentor'* (AT1). Clarke et al. (2014) argue that we need to understand the nuanced way that ATs work with and learn from their mentor, particularly as ATs' learning is situated in different school and university contexts. In this study ATs typically highlighted the value of daily unscheduled learning conversations that provided support and feedback; *'It's the day-to-day practical advice and reviewing lessons with my mentor'* (AT42). Informal dialogue is thought to support successful mentoring programmes, indeed Jones et al. (2018) note that these learning conversations are often claimed by ATs to be where genuine learning takes place; *'This is where the learning happens. In relaxed, low stakes conversations about teaching. Enjoyable and informative'* (AT11).

The dialogue provided an opportunity for the ATs to learn and informed their understanding of how to teach and how to be a teacher. This process was ostensibly more effective when the dialogue was part of greater collaboration between the AT and

the mentor. One AT noted that *'it worked best when we planned and taught together and then reviewed it afterwards'* (AT30). The ATs valued working with mentors who were fully invested in the process and provided opportunities to design, teach and review learning together. When the mentors discussed learning without any predetermined solutions, it became a more democratic and shared investigation where both participants were reflecting on their decision making and teaching. They engaged in shared deliberation, where both were trying to learn and to find possible solutions; *'The mentor taught the lesson, we discussed it and made changes. I then taught the lesson. We improved the lesson together and both benefited from the process'* (AT44). When mentors engaged in the collaborative process of shared reflection, their participation emphasised the value that they put on working with and learning from the AT. Moreover, they exemplified the process of questioning beliefs and practices as a means of learning from the experience of teaching. The mentor was showing that asking questions, engaging in evidence-based research and sharing discussions about learning was as important to them as it was to the AT (Payne, 2018).

Although these findings may present a seemingly cohesive picture of mentoring relationships, some of the ATs did experience aspects of tension and conflict in their work in schools. One noted that *'my mentor was difficult and unsupportive in the outset'* (AT32) while another similarly stated that *'I stayed after school to have discussions but they were not always helpful as I struggled to understand what she wanted and by asking more questions I felt she was annoyed by me'* (AT26).

The conflict evident in some of the relationships may have actually emerged because a dialogic approach was adopted. The issues that occurred in lessons required ATs to reflect on their experiences, ask questions, discuss with others and put their thinking into action. The approach adopted by the partnership emphasised the need for ATs to develop these skills and a disposition towards critical reflection (Griffiths et al., 2020). In some settings however, the mentors themselves were found to lack these characteristics; *'Not all mentors are confident or skilled in having constructive conversations, they are either overly critical or unwilling to be honest'* (AT25).

Critical thinking is seen to be a key democratic skill (Payne, 2018) but it does depend on mentors allowing ATs to challenge existing practices and philosophies. At times ATs disagreed with their mentor's core principles; *'Less effective mentoring was displayed in the instances of disagreement in pedagogy.'* (AT4). This could create a lack of engagement *'I think this stand off-ish approach made it very hard to approach issues'* (AT21), with the relative power of the AT and mentor often deciding matters; *'I felt obliged to not address this and to make lesson plans that fit his style of teaching'* (AT13).

Engaging in critical reflection could engender feelings of discomfort, as different people may have had different and conflicting views (Griffiths et al., 2020). When adopting a monological approach mentors did not encounter these difficulties in the same way as their views and opinions were understood to be the ones that counted (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). A dialogic approach created a more complex social relationship where the mentor and AT formed more of a democratic partnership to support joint enquiry. This may have presented a desirable level of conflict that challenged the thinking of the mentor and the AT, but it did depend on the willingness of the former to engage in critical reflection in a skilful manner. This was more challenging for the mentor who may have consequently needed more specific training. They were trying to balance the promotion of recognised good

practice with the opportunity for the AT to challenge existing thinking and experiment with new ideas. Without adequate preparation, this challenge meant that some mentors reverted to arguably more comfortable monological approaches where their view dominated.

The conflict that could arise from dialogic mentoring emphasised the value of a successful relationship where the AT and the mentor were both willing to contribute and learn from the other (Jones et al., 2019). Committing to a dialogic approach made those involved in the ITE partnership consider the nature of their relationship with others. It required mentors and ATs to attend to the experience of working together in a mutually productive and respectful way; *'I had really good relationships with my classroom mentors, they supported me constantly and they pushed me to be the best I could be'* (AT24).

## Conclusion

It will inevitably take some time for the partnership to adapt to a new mentoring model. That said, the prioritisation of mentoring within Welsh education reform (Furlong, 2015) has helped the partnership to establish the dialogic approach in their schools. Moreover, where these approaches have been adopted and used consistently, the ATs appeared to be more satisfied. The ATs typically valued the conversations that they had about learning, as shared discussions informed their understanding of how to teach and how to be a teacher.

There are challenges relating to the use of a dialogic mentoring approach. The ATs may not get enough specific and focused feedback from dialogic conversations and there are also further challenges relating to relationships, particularly the managing of conflict. A dialogic approach often asks mentors and ATs to consider fundamental aspects of their own philosophical beliefs and this can result in tension. This may be a good thing as a critical and questioning approach should ensure that school placements are more than acculturation to existing approaches. A shift to a dialogic approach may, however, require heightened attention to the dispositions of the teachers who are asked to mentor ATs, to ensure that they are committed to open conversations about learning.

When mentors are fully invested in the dialogic process the ATs experienced less anxiety when they were observed teaching and formed supportive relationships that allowed them to take risks in the classroom. The dialogic approach promoted a view that knowledge of teaching is socially constructed through the experiences of all participants. Thus, the ATs were asked for their own views and felt that they were valued and treated as teachers. The dialogic approach was more democratic, it repositioned the mentor and AT as a collaborative partnership and helped to nurture the ATs' agentive professional identity.

## Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

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