

# **Newly Qualified Teachers' Professional Learning through Practitioner Enquiry: Investigating Partnership-Based Mentoring**

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## **Purpose**

This paper focuses on a partnership-based mentoring model and the learning experiences of participant mentees and mentors. As part of the project, newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were supported to develop and implement a practitioner enquiry (teacher/action research) in a learning community involving two local authorities and an initial teacher education institution.

## **Design/methodology/approach**

Qualitative data was collected from five semi-structured focus group interviews with key participant groupings to uncover perceptions and experiences of the partnership and professional learning therein. Analysis using an inductive and iterative approach pinpointed a number of emerging themes used to frame key elements of the findings.

## **Findings**

Findings suggested that the partnership-based model promoted the professional learning and development of NQTs and their mentors in various ways. The nature and shape of the partnership had an influence on the quality of mentoring and support experienced. The community effectively supported the implementation of meaningful enquiry projects, which had clear connections to the enhancement of professional practice and pupil learning. However, specific tensions and conflicts emerged as hindrances to successful partnership-based mentoring in the specific context.

## **Originality/value**

New insights into the role of a partnership-based mentoring scheme supporting practitioner enquiry-based learning of NQTs emerged. The local, layered community defining the partnership, and operating within the frame of a national induction scheme, was analysed. Benefits for partners were identified and specific challenges and tensions highlighted, both providing new evidence with potential to impact policy and practice. Policy developments supporting teachers to be mentors and enquiring professionals need to recognise the structural and support tensions that exist in contextual practice.

## **Keywords**

collaborative partnership, mentoring, newly qualified teachers; professional learning, enquiry

## **Classification**

Research paper

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## Introduction

Becoming a teacher is a gradual process involving the shaping of professional identity and the development of appropriate professional knowledge, skills, and values (McCormack *et al.*, 2006). In some educational systems, such as Scotland and New Zealand, it is mandatory that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) be allocated a proportion of their induction period in school to develop and evidence a range of professional activities, such as continuous professional development (CPD), before they attain fully qualified teacher status. For example, according to the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS, n.d.a), in Scotland NQTs are allocated 20% of full-time contact hours for CPD-related activities. In New Zealand, induction provides a “key opportunity and time for intensive, sustained professional learning ... focused on enabling NQTs to learn and practise the skills, attitudes and attributes they need to become accomplished, fully certificated teachers” (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015, p. 9).

However, the CPD that NQTs experience can be loosely conceived, often taking the form of set-piece isolated events that may not take account of individual learning dispositions or context (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005; Shanks *et al.*, 2012). Equally, Goldrick (2009) noted that “the developmental pathway into teaching and through the teaching career is characterized by a largely fragmented and incoherent system of training and support” (p. 2). It can therefore be difficult to envisage the usefulness of the available CPD in developing effective teachers, for example in supporting them to make evidence-based connections between theory and practice (Armour, *et al.*, 2012). This can mean that NQTs may not be optimally supported when acting as “proto-professionals” (Hilton and Slotnick, 2005) during what researchers consider to be the most important period of professional transition, with potential adverse impact on NQT attrition, as reported internationally (Guarino *et al.*, 2006; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2005; Towse *et al.*, 2002).

Research has further shown that the retention rates of early career teachers (including NQTs) are strongly influenced by gradual and supported immersion into communities of practice (Samaras and Gismondi, 1998). This relates to the idea of legitimate peripheral participation, whereby gradual support (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005) within expansive communities of practice is provided until

they develop critical abilities in teaching with less formalised support (Wenger, 1998). It is generally acknowledged that professional learning and support frameworks incorporating mentoring during early career stages can have lasting effects on the quality of practice of teachers. Challenges that NQTs may face are often complex and dynamic, and involve a range of personnel, organisations, and environments. Mentoring, underpinned by some form of partnership, can go a long way in ensuring that NQTs are better supported during their early teaching experiences. Such partnerships have been variously contextualised and take many different forms dependent on context and activities in focus (Castanheira, 2016; Wilson, 2004).

Internationally, a number of studies have explored the efficacy of school-university partnerships (e.g., Mtika *et al.*, 2014; Zeichner, 2010; Jeffery and Tobias, 2009; Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, studies have often tended to focus on school-university partnerships for supporting student teachers during practicum or field experience (e.g., Cope and Stephen, 2001; MacDougall *et al.*, 2013).

This paper reports on research undertaken to understand the partnership model and learning experiences of mentees and mentors within a project enabling NQTs to implement practitioner enquiry [teacher/action research] whilst supported by a learning community, comprising a Scottish university and two local authority partners. The study makes a specific contribution to knowledge about the professional learning of NQTs and their mentors in a local context within a national induction scheme. It also uncovers challenges and tensions existing in the implementation of the partnership-based mentoring model. The project aligns with ongoing momentum to support the development of an evidence-informed and enquiring teacher profession in Scotland, to promote mentoring capacity building, and to strengthen partnership working between various stakeholders around early career support and transitions (Donaldson, 2011).

## **Review of Literature**

To provide grounding for our study, we mainly focus on three elements of the extant literature. In this section, we discuss teacher professional learning, collaborative partnership, and educative mentoring as the structural underpinning for our work.

### ***Professional Learning***

“Teachers are not ‘finished products’ when they complete their initial teacher preparation” (Goldrick, 2009, p. 3), but rather, they are supposed to be lifelong learners. This calls for career-long professional learning premised on the belief that teachers who undergo high-quality professional learning would be more effective with resultant enhanced students’ learning outcomes. Darling-Hammond (2003) noted that “well-prepared teachers have the largest impact on pupil learning” (p. 7). With this in mind, there is the need for appropriate structures for promoting the development of teachers’ knowledge and skills.

It is important to note that the professional learning needs of novice teachers differ from those of experienced teachers. Novice teachers are, on average, less effective than their more experienced peers (Goldrick, 2009). As such, they require more high-quality formal professional learning to develop essential knowledge, skills, and competencies required to register as a fully qualified teacher. In many cases, novice teachers will undertake formal CPD approved by the teaching profession regulatory body, such as the GTCS (Scottish Executive, 2003). On the other hand, for experienced teachers, their subsequent professional learning is often seen to be largely informal and based on their daily practice (Kelchtermans, 2004). However, formal professional learning for experienced teachers, such as development of mentoring skills and knowledge, can be important.

It is argued here that carefully planned professional learning of novice teachers such as NQTs (McCormack *et al.*, 2006), often within a collaborative framework (MacDougall *et al.*, 2013), is desirable. Reflected within professional learning, and underpinned by a collaborative framework, is situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which suggests that effective professional learning for NQTs entails participation in communities of practice. Timperley *et al.* (2008) identified aspects, which they considered to be important for professional learning, noting:

providing sufficient time for extended opportunities to learn and using the time effectively; engaging external expertise; focusing on engaging teachers in the learning process rather than being concerned about whether they volunteered or not; challenging problematic discourses; providing opportunities to interact in a community of professionals; ensuring content was consistent with wider policy trends; and, in school-based initiatives, having leaders actively leading the professional learning opportunities. (Timperley *et al.*, 2008, p. xxvi)

In this sense, professional learning is very much fashioned by the school context in which NQTs are placed and the expansive/restrictive nature of the environment therein (Shanks *et al.*, 2012). School contexts are strongly influenced by inherent local and wider school culture, which can provide affordances or constraints to novice and experienced teachers' efforts to meaningfully engage with professional learning delivered in partnership with outside groups.

In the current study, collaborative partnership and mentoring were conceived as vehicles for supporting the professional learning of NQTs through school-based practitioner enquiry. The enquiry projects were underpinned by the view that "learning to become a teacher involves, among other things, developing a capacity to interpret and act on the workplace and to question meanings and the social practices that sustain them" (Edwards, 2010, p. 67).

### **Collaborative Partnership**

Although partnership is a long-established practice between initial teacher education institutions and schools, many partnerships tend to be loosely conceptualised and mainly become active during the practicum phase of teacher preparation. Researchers have reported existing tensions regarding the development of such partnerships (Lynch and Smith, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2006). It has been argued that partners often constitute distinctive systems with varying resources, goals, and values, which can result in tensions (Grossman *et al.*, 1999).

Furthermore, it has been argued that partnerships designed to facilitate better engagement of key stakeholders in teacher education must extend beyond the practicum phase to include the induction period and lifelong learning (Gopinathan *et al.*, 2008). The project we report on was an attempt to extend collaborative partnership to the induction period.

Collaborative partnership is characterised by universities, local authorities, and schools working together less hierarchically (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2007; Zeichner, 2010). Such partnership is strengthened by mutual sharing and respect for each stakeholder's perspectives, experiences, expertise, knowledge and goals (Gopinathan *et al.*, 2009). Collaborative partnership differs from the hierarchical partnership in which the university manages and drives the agenda, with schools viewed largely as sites for implementation (Lynch and Smith 2012). It has been observed that this type of

partnership perpetuates the view that knowledge from university is more superior to the practitioner knowledge of local authorities and schools (Lynch and Smith, 2012; Smith and Lynch, 2010; Zeichner, 2010).

Policy drives for collaborative partnership in teacher professional learning are based on the understanding that developing and enhancing teacher knowledge and skills does not happen in isolation (van Huizen *et al.*, 2005). Within the Scottish policy context, collaborative partnership was clearly reflected in the Donaldson (2011) report, noting “in order to improve continuity and coherence for new teachers, university-based teacher educators should have a role in the development and delivery of induction schemes” (p. 93): this may best be coordinated through collaborative partnership. Collaborative partnership is underpinned by a number of theoretical frames including expansive communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), co-mentoring (Crutcher and Naseem, 2016), and models of professional and lifelong learning (Kennedy, 2005). Such partnership can help build “hybrid spaces” in which “academic and practitioner knowledge ... come together in new less hierarchical ways” (Zeichner, 2010, p. 89) to support the professional development of all partners. Similarly, Borzillo and Kaminska-Labbé (2011) pointed to boundary spanning in knowledge development through collaboration.

Exposure to collaborative partnership can support NQTs to develop as reflective, enquiring, and collaborative practitioners, as promoted by recent policy developments and the Professional Standards Framework defining career-long professional learning (CLPL) in Scotland (GTCS, 2012a). One of the key policy recommendations of the most recent review of teacher education in Scotland states:

New and strengthened models of partnership among universities, local authorities, schools and individual teachers need to be developed ... based on jointly agreed principles and involve shared responsibility for key areas of teacher education. (Donaldson, 2011, p. 91)

Other specific recommendations from Donaldson (2011) highlight the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to undertake research and enquiry, to be collaborative, to engage in mentoring practice, and to undertake CPD: “The balance of CPD should continue to shift from set piece events. ... achieve an appropriate blend of individual improvement and school improvement” (Donaldson, 2011, p. 96).

We argue here that to promote meaningful professional learning for NQTs, collaborative partnership can offer a credible framework involving synergistic realignment of mentors, mentees, and teacher educators (Lynch and Smith, 2012; Zeichner, 2010).

### **Mentoring**

Globally, mentoring has been increasingly recognised and used to support student teachers and NQTs during their school-based practice (Aderibigbe, 2013; Hobson, 2002; Mtika *et al.*, 2014; Strong and Baron, 2004). Mentoring is viewed as one of the most important factors for improving teacher effectiveness and subsequent learning outcomes (Hobson *et al.*, 2009). Colley (2002) noted that mentoring has become an essential element of teacher preparation in many countries. Mentoring is generally utilised as a strategy for retaining preservice and early career teachers and as a catalyst for change in schools (Smith and Ingersoll, 2004; Whitaker, 2003). Feiman-Nemser and Parker (1993) pointed to mentors acting as agents of change. During mentoring, the responsibility for the professional development of NQTs (or indeed a student teacher) often rests with an experienced teacher (Hobson *et al.*, 2009). Mentors are required to provide close support in relation to aspects such as lesson preparation, pupil learning needs and abilities diagnoses, classroom learning processes, and reflection. Mentoring during induction of NQTs is seen as an important feature of high-quality teacher immersion into the profession (Goldrick, 2009).

### **Educative Mentoring**

Mentoring has been conceptualised in different ways. For the purposes of this paper, we utilise the concept of educative mentoring as enacted in schools, local authorities, and teacher education institutions through collaborative partnership. Within educative mentoring, teaching is viewed as a complex activity where NQTs need to develop capacity to make intelligent decisions and handle ambiguous and often challenging situations. According to Zeichner (1996), within this mentoring frame, NQTs need to be encouraged to experiment, to develop novel ways of teaching, and test hypotheses about classrooms and learning. The development of 'experiments' might best be construed through engagement with practitioner enquiry, a key element of this study. Within such a model, pedagogical or educational theories developed during university coursework are not simply

applied to educational situations in an isolated setting, but rather NQTs work with their mentors to investigate, reflect on, and interpret unique teaching and learning situations as they are encountered (Zeichner, 1996). Within this project, the role of university teacher educators is also significant as they work with mentors and mentees to gain a better understanding of the realities of school contexts.

Educative mentoring within a collaborative partnership can help shift perspectives through mutual engagement in the exploration of possibilities, promoting mutual learning benefit (Dolan, 2012). In this case, educative mentoring requires that schools and teacher education institutions be linked so that local authority mentors for NQTs develop an understanding of their mentoring roles in collaboration with the university, whilst challenging the traditional hierarchy of activity (Whitehead and Fitzgerald, 2006). Within this framework, partnership-based mentoring is viewed “as a learning process experienced by mentors, mentees and university tutors working collaboratively on problems of practice” (Richmond *et al.*, 2017, p. 8).

The foregoing discussion suggests that professional learning of novice teachers is crucial in promoting teacher effectiveness and retention (Berry *et al.*, 2008). Further, educative mentoring underpinned by collaborative partnership is critical for the professional learning of NQTs (and their mentors) during the induction phase (Richmond *et al.*, 2017). This study is a timely contribution to knowledge in this field. It investigates the professional learning of NQTs and mentors as part of a collaborative partnership project in which educative mentoring involving a Scottish university, two local education authority [local school district] partners, and schools was implemented.

### **Research Context**

This project took place at a time when various reforms in teacher education were being implemented in Scotland in the wake of the Donaldson (2011) report. With funding from the Scottish Government, induction year NQTs (also known as probationers) from two local authorities were encouraged to undertake practitioner enquiry connecting with the development of their professional practice and school/local authority priorities, aligning with selected benchmarks of the Standard for Full Registration (GTCS, 2012b), and focusing on pupil learning. In Scotland, newly qualified teachers are guaranteed a one-year induction experience, during which they strive to make the transition from

provisionally registered to fully registered teacher status within a national structured framework of support (the Teacher Induction Scheme) managed locally by their local authority employer and host school (GTCS, n.d.a).

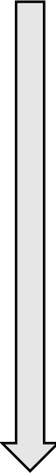
The project was part of an initiative to build capacity through partnership. The initiative was mainly aimed at:

- i. supporting NQTs to develop classroom-based practitioner enquiry skills to facilitate the development of practice and generate evidence to provide deeper insights into pupil learning;
- ii. supporting local authority mentors and university tutors to develop mentoring skills in the context of practitioner enquiry.

The partnership was devised with a view to providing a multi-layered supportive framework for all participants within a co-collaborative mentoring frame. The NQTs group (225 in total) were supported through the practitioner enquiry process by local authority mentors (11) who, in turn, were supported in a triad set up by university tutors (5). Some of the local authority mentors were released from their regular work to support a group of NQTs in different schools through all aspects of their induction year experience. The community of mentors and university tutors took part in four activity-based group development events involving case study analysis, with a view to co-constructing mentoring knowledge and skills in the context of supporting practitioner enquiry. In addition, university tutors met with the local authority mentors in a triad format to co-construct support for individual NQTs at three key points in the practitioner enquiry process.

The NQTs were supported by teaching sessions on practitioner enquiry, access to on-line and library university resources, and peer group communities. Enquiry topics aligned with NQT professional and personal interests and school and local authority priorities, and scoped familiar areas such as assessment, behaviour management, and numeracy and literacy. Pupil learning attributes in focus aligned with the four defining capacities of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, n.d.a). A schedule of activity is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Activity Schedule

PROCESS OF ENQUIRY	NQT GROUP	MENTOR COMMUNITY	TRIAD MEETINGS	MENTOR / NQT ENGAGEMENT
- Month 1 -		DEVELOPMENT EVENTS 1 & 2		AS REQUIRED
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">PLAN / DESIGN</div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	CPD EVENT 1		MEET 1	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">IMPLEMENT</div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	CPD EVENT 2	DEVELOPMENT EVENT 3	MEET 2	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">ANALYSIS / REPORTING</div> <div style="text-align: center;">↓</div>	CPD EVENT 3	DEVELOPMENT EVENT 4	MEET 3	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE / SHARING EVENT</div>				
- Month 8 -				

The multi-layered support architecture led naturally to the emergence of a set of interconnected mentoring communities comprising mixed groups of partner stakeholders. This project focuses on the operation and learning of personnel within the communities of practice developed to support bridging the gap between teacher preparation and practice in school, as suggested by D'Souza (2014).

## The Study

### Research Objectives and Research Questions

The overarching objective of this research was to examine the implementation of the partnership project in terms of emerging benefits, challenges, and tensions, with a view to informing future practice and policy. More specifically, we sought to develop a better understanding of the ways in which involvement has impacted the professional learning and development of NQTs (mentees) and benefited their local authority mentors. The underpinning research questions were:

1. In what ways was the professional learning and development of mentee and mentors

affected by taking part in the initiative?

2. What were the specific tensions and challenges experienced during implementation of the partnership-based support model?

## Methodology

A qualitative methodology involving focus group interviews and document analysis was adopted to enable the researchers to gain deeper understandings of the dynamics of partnership-based mentoring from the perspectives of key participants. Qualitative methodology enables a deeper understanding of “how social experiences are created and given meaning” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, p. 10) from participants’ lived experiences. In addition, as Silverman (2005) noted, qualitative research tends to work with a relatively small number of cases and “sacrifices scope for detail” (p. 9). Semi-structured focus group interviews provide opportunities for participants to talk in more detail about their individual experiences (Silverman, 2005). Five such interviews were conducted across the participant groups, as indicated in Table 1. The participants were mainly female, aged between 20 and 50 years, and taught in primary and secondary sectors. They were representative of the study population, in terms of gender, age and teaching sector.

Table 1: Focus Group Participants

Participant Group	Focus Groups	Participant Numbers in Each Group
NQTs	2	5
Local Authority Mentors	2	3
University Tutors	1	3

The interview questions were piloted in collaboration with university and local authority project coordinators to assess relevance and understanding. Each interview, lasting around 45 minutes, comprised a set of base questions and prompts (for example, “*What are your experiences of involvement in the project? Prompts: Positive aspects of your involvement? Sub-prompts: People/Skills/Knowledge/Resources*”). NQT and mentor interviews were led by participant university tutors not directly involved with their project experiences. The university tutors were interviewed by a researcher colleague not directly involved with the project.

The interview data was subjected to a thematic analytical approach (Bryman, 2004) with a

view to providing in-depth insights into all aspects of the partnership. A staged, iterative coding approach was used to search for patterns and explanations (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). The process led to the creation of a more focused set of interlinked themes which encompassed nuances, convergent, or divergent views (see Table 2). In addition, document analysis of activities undertaken provided supporting contextual information.

Table 2: Illustration of Staged Thematic Analysis

Initial Theme	Developing Theme	Exemplar
Professional learning and development: Mentee learning	Evidence-based practice	<i>"You can actually say what's working, what's not working ... and you've actually got the evidence there to support it and it's not just your initial thoughts".</i>
	Community dialogue	<i>"Everyone was networking in different ways to gather more expert advice in certain areas".</i>

The research was carried out in line with published ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2011). Organisation level ethical approval was granted through appropriate channels. All participants were given information regarding the purpose and nature of the project and gave informed consent for their involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were also assured for all individuals who provided data. The careful selection of non-insider focus group interviewers encouraged participants to be more open about their experiences (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004).

The study has a number of limitations worth highlighting. The research is focused in a particular multi-layered partnership context, which limits the generalisability of findings. However, other researchers might find these findings to be relevant to their context. Whilst interviewer selection arrangements were made to ensure more open responses to questioning and coverage of ethical dimensions, some participants may have been reluctant to relate every aspect of their experience. However, the collection of data from three sources was enacted to provide authentication of perspectives.

## Findings

This study examined the professional learning and development of key participants as part of a

collaborative partnership-based mentoring project in which NQTs implemented a practitioner enquiry. Through the study, we also wanted to explore specific issues, tensions, and challenges experienced by partners. Findings highlighted a number of specific interconnecting areas where the initiative has impacted the professional learning of mentors and mentees. In broad terms, these can be categorised as participation in communities, making connections with teaching and learning practice, and deepening understanding of partnership opportunities. In the subsequent sections, findings are provided thematically with supporting excerpts from the interviews conducted, reflecting the range of salient positions taken by participants.

### **Professional Learning and Development**

A critical finding from the study was that the collaborative partnership was generally viewed to have provided opportunities for professional learning, for not only NQTs but also their local authority mentors.

Participating NQTs (mentees) reflected on the benefits of participation in mentor-supported communities of learners, specifically in relation to the strengthening of professional networks with peers and mentors, and the reinforcement of research process knowledge. As one mentee noted, they were:

able to discuss ideas in groups ... take these ideas into one-to-one session to further discuss.

This was perceived to be a valuable way of sharing knowledge and understanding as a basis for professional learning. Another mentee echoed:

It was good to get input specific to my own project but also good to hear what others were doing, how they were getting on and how they were going about it.

Essentially, NQTs were receiving specific dialogic support for their enquiry. In addition, they were able to learn about other ongoing activities of benefit to their professional development. Mentored NQTs appreciated the cross-sector dialogue which emerged. One reflected on this:

Useful practical information gained through engagement in cross-sector discussion and sharing ... same strategy, such as peer assessment, tried in different setting.

It was also reported that the partnership supported mentees to make specific, reflective connections between enquiry and ongoing practice, encouraging them to develop as agents for change. A mentee noted:

I think it's helped me to reflect on my practice because I know we always implement new strategies into the classroom but having this structure and thinking about instruments to actually measure what we're trying to achieve, I found that you were able to evaluate it and then think about right what could I do next?

Another mentee connected their enquiry (research) to evidence-based practice, currently being widely promoted within Scottish schools.

You can actually say what's working, what's not working ... and you've actually got the evidence there to support it and it's not just your initial thoughts.

Participating mentors pointed to opportunities for professional dialogue and collaboration across the entire mentor community. They found these to be helpful in various ways. One mentor noted:

Everyone was networking in different ways to gather more expert advice in certain areas.

It was also noted that professional dialogue was enriching for all participants as they were able to consider the evolving project implementation:

Tutor meetings were really beneficial to be able to work collaboratively and work in partnership discussing what was going to happen, what things would look like, to be able to sort of reflect on what had been brought in and to be able to discuss similarities, differences.

For some of the mentors, the experience of supporting enquiry as conceptualised in this project offered a challenge as well as an opportunity for learning. One noted:

I have found supporting the group to be a learning curve, but working with the triad group was interesting as I found out about the feedback being given to different research projects.

Professional dialogue provided scaffolding moments for some of the mentors who were supporting NQTs for the first time:

... wealth of research experience across the [mentor] group that can be capitalised on through paired work and joint sharing sessions.

Working with colleagues from different sectors ... provides useful insights.

Respondents highlighted professional renewal in relation to their own thinking and practice, notably connecting with the policy-theory-research-practice landscape. A mentor remarked:

Throughout the process I have been given the opportunity to revisit some of the theories behind practice and explore new ones.

Another mentor noted how this partnership was opening them up to different professional perspectives:

It kept me up to date with different things that are going on ... I think you can become quite pigeonholed in your own little setting.

Yet another mentor reiterated how the project created space in which professionals were able to more meaningfully engage with relevant policies.

I think being aware of the policies as well because the policies are there but you don't actually pick them up all that often ... tie in together the policies from across ... the national policies with local authority and the school policies.

Mentors specifically pointed to the development of their own research skills, commenting:

I've learnt a lot about action research [sic] myself and how to implement it and put it into practice and then reflect on it. Just through going with the NQTs through that process, I would feel more confident now in my own teaching practice to go and do more action research and changing of things within my own practice.

School leadership had also identified benefits which accrued to their staff from the partnership, considering wider school impact. A mentor reflected:

My head teacher said just how you could see how it had impacted on my learning over the year and the feedback that I've been giving to colleagues when we've had staff meetings.

One of the mentor's comments also pointed to future practice:

I learnt a lot from it and it makes me think in the future I'd like to do more of that kind of tutor role, or supporting role.

Mentors also reflected on new and enhanced understandings of 'cultural' differences between organisations comprising the partnership, with some focus on knowledge, systems, and people:

The whole thing of being part of a team has really helped my confidence in the partnership working but I also know that I've always had somebody to go to, to ask for advice.

... a learning curve on many levels, with the opportunity to work with other professionals from different organisations, gather a firmer understanding of university operations.

Different mind-sets about action research ... a useful systematic approach to planning for practice and gathering evidence ... professional responsibility.

To summarise, the findings point to a range of professional and personal learning and development opportunities for both mentees and mentors, built on strong and supportive networks within the layered partnership and effective relationships between individuals.

### **Tensions and Challenges**

The data also pointed to a number of implementation tensions and challenges. These were linked to challenging individual, social, cultural, and systemic factors that require consideration when pursuing professional development initiatives of this type.

### ***A Complex Landscape***

It was found that the timing, scope, and nature of the enquiry aspect were important. NQTs in their induction period were negotiating a complex landscape of challenges, competing demands, and agendas. As one NQT reflected:

I think that engaging in this project was an added stress when being so new to the job. I believe that it is a very worthwhile activity but should be phased in maybe in the second or third year of teaching once you have more experience and time to give the project your full

attention.

Engagement with CPD is a formal requirement for successful completion of induction, but involvement in practitioner enquiry was a new and challenging venture for some.

Theoretically, it should not add any extra work as it should be a natural part of the teaching process. However, in reality, this is not the case. Reviewing literature, collecting data, analysing results and considering implications are all time consuming processes. With an already huge learning curve in your first year responsible for a class, I feel that there are more important things to focus time and energy on.

Staffing difficulties in schools meant that mentors had a range of other responsibilities and therefore were not only supporting NQTs. One NQT pointed to the demanding school landscape experienced within the partnership:

My mentor was very supportive and a wonderful help; however, she was restricted by the same issues revolving around free time in an understaffed school.

This was echoed by a tutor from the university. She summed up the situation, stating:

Given the pressures during the induction year and towards the end when seeking continuing employment, there were times when engagement with the process became an uphill struggle.

This practical challenge raises questions about the inclusion of practitioner enquiry-based professional learning during induction. However, the Standard for Full Registration [SFR] (GTCS, 2012b) points to the need for NQTs to provide evidence to demonstrate their ability to meet the SFR during the induction year. Amongst the SFR benchmarks, evidence of engagement with research and enquiry (Benchmark 2.4.1) and activity within communities of learners (Benchmark 3.3) is required. In this spirit, an NQT remarked:

Do not get overwhelmed by the initial prospect of the AR [action research] project; see it as an opportunity to develop an area of your practice and simply incorporate it into your planning, teaching and assessment.

### ***The Value of Enquiry***

Another challenging dimension related to entrenched attitudes about the value of enquiry to the development of practice on the part of some of the host schools. NQTs noted that:

[Some] schools are reluctant to sanction time off for action research project. Other teachers in the school were at best uninterested and some were highly critical.

I don't think that the schools take it very seriously... and even certain teachers.

These comments suggest a fundamental challenge that can affect the success of any meaningful school level intervention which is undertaken by NQTs when not enjoying the approval of others.

Equally, the fact that taking part in enquiry during induction was not mandatory in all local authorities meant that NQT participants were aware of others who were not required to undertake enquiry. The additional burden perceived by some was negatively reflected on:

I rather resented having to do something my friends in other local [education] authorities weren't having to do.

On the other hand, it was encouraging to note that the NQT cohort valued the opportunity to share their research in their work setting and/or with their peer group, providing further opportunities for collegiate learning:

The most valuable, constructive, helpful part of the whole thing in informing my practice was the 'celebration' event where we spoke to others about our topic.

Similarly, university tutors commented:

[NQTs] found it beneficial to share their projects with each other and, for some, it all seemed to make more sense at the end of the year.

[The event enabled] engagement in cross sector discussion and a sharing of ideas, including the need for more opportunities for sharing information about teaching strategies.

Looking forward, one mentor noted:

All of my group go onto their [GTCS profile area] now and I've encouraged them to load their research onto the evidence file, I've encouraged them to do an entry about the reflection on their research and how they might make use of it next year.

One university tutor summed up the tensions experienced:

Overall, it appeared that the requirement to carry out research had resulted in learning but learning is uncomfortable disequilibrium.

### ***Mentoring Community***

The complex support landscape has provided systemic challenges. Each NQT has a designated support mentor within the induction scheme, who for some was also their research mentor. However, this was not the case for all, and this had the potential to result in a blurring of roles and responsibilities for those involved in providing support.

Research has pointed to the benefits of *expansive* rather than *restrictive* learning communities (Shanks *et al.*, 2012); however, the complex layering of mentoring did not always lead to *expansive* support. One NQT stated:

I felt that we weren't really supported in school with regards to the action research project as the school was not aware of what we were doing and we were the ones trying to explain the situation to our probationer mentor and our subject mentor.

Research mentors had different levels of mentoring experience, and most had undertaken enquiry and research, but not many had provided mentoring specific to enquiry. The partnership community of mentors and university-based tutors worked together to co-construct approaches and resources for mentoring for enquiry, drawing on their relevant experiences; however, it proved difficult to align activities with the entire range of participant needs. Specific challenges emerged, as commented on by an NQT:

My full-release mentor was my tutor. Neither of us felt very confident about the process. It was a very stressful time.

Mentors adopted a range of supportive organisational and content approaches, but NQT mentees did not always access the support offered. For released mentors, existing organisational clarity and mentoring experience were helpful aspects.

However, some mentors did appear to welcome support from university tutors in this

connection. A mentor remarked:

Most challenging aspects for myself was actually going back and reminding myself about research and how to research, so I found the discussions with [university tutor] very informative. For me to go away and remind myself and read up on things and be more familiar with the process again ... was good for my own CPD.

The feedback, it was good that we were supported by the university to be able to provide that moderated type of feedback using the forms that we had discussed at the group meetings that we'd had.

However, interestingly, one university tutor found challenges in engaging with local authority mentors.

Most triads worked well, but in this case, the process required tutors to be:

... the drivers, expected to make the process happen by arranging meetings with probationer teachers and mentors.

In relation to the support they were able to provide, full-release mentors highlighted the importance of building on existing relationships/community:

Able to have that very close relationship, partnership with that probationer and knowing how to develop their own practice linked to their research.

I was also able to make connections within my group where I knew people were doing similar things ... and I was originally going to have group twilight on it to get them all to come and share but they themselves weren't keen and said there's actually other things we would rather work as a group. However, they ... they then got together independently and met up.

The other mentors who were not on full release, recognised such benefits and specific challenges for them:

Clearly, you are able to spend that valuable time at the beginning of the year building up the relationship with your probationers which is key to this whole thing.

And the impact on obviously being a new mentor, learning the mentoring and coaching role but then having that on top and the balance of time.

The findings highlight a number of tensions and challenges when implementing a local initiative within

a national system, notably in relation to the attitudes, experiences, roles, and responsibilities of participants who are operating within a complex, challenging and, at times, conflicting support landscape.

## **Discussion**

Examination of the activity defining the partnership has reinforced the importance of supportive professional relationships and communities of practice. The partnership opened up opportunities for 'boundaries' between organisations and individuals to be bridged, but has also highlighted multi-layered complexities with resultant particular challenges and tensions. The findings are discussed in relation to the key concepts of professional learning and development, mentoring support, and communities of learners.

### ***Professional Learning and Development in a Mentoring Partnership***

Findings pointed to the collaborative partnership providing an effective framework of support for valuable professional learning and development of the key participants (Kennedy, 2005), enabling the generation of evidence to match with a range of benchmarks of the relevant professional teaching Standards (GTCS, 2012a, 2012b) and underpin lifelong learning.

The collaborative partnership supported mentees to bridge the theory–practice divide (Armour *et al.*, 2012), develop their reflective skills, and move their practice forward – with potential for action as 'change agents' (Feiman-Nemser *et al.*, 1993). In addition, the value of sharing their enquiry findings with the peer group was highlighted, notably in relation to guiding future practice/opportunities. Effective learning networks build capacity through ongoing collaborative activity (National College of School Leadership, 2005).

Similarly, involvement encouraged mentors to reappraise aspects of their own practice, reiterating the importance of engagement with policy and research, and encouraging them to revisit their practice within evidence-based enquiry processes. A process of professional renewal (Kelchtermans, 2004) emerged, where mentors were learning along with their mentees whilst addressing aspects of the professional Standards beyond those concerned with mentoring per se.

Aligning with ideas that social practices are natural to learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991),

mentees and mentors pointed to the community in terms of strengthening professional networks and alleviating the feelings of isolation, whilst specifically supporting the process of practitioner enquiry. Individual mentee motivation also proved to be an important element of the learning (Billett, 2002).

Previous work (Colvin and Ashman, 2010) has suggested that mentoring relationships have often been restricted by poor partnership, but evidence of boundary spanning (Borzillo *et al.*, 2011) and academic and practitioner knowledge coming together (Zeichner, 2010) were evident in this study. Mentors clearly demonstrated a deeper understanding of the perspectives, knowledge, and skills bases of different participants, whilst improving relationships across the community (Whitehead and Fitzgerald, 2006). This in turn may provide opportunities for future collaborative work within expansive communities of practice (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2005). It may be argued that the development of cross-sector relationships and communities (within different sub-groupings of participants) provides the infrastructure to facilitate the development of successful mentoring processes focused in domains more naturally inhabited by higher education.

### ***Tensions and Challenges***

Further, findings pointed to the demanding and complex landscape experienced by the key participants (notably the NQTs), resulting in challenges in relation to engagement with, and attitudes to, activities and expectations.

Despite the fact that all teachers in Scotland are expected to demonstrate engagement with practitioner enquiry (teacher research/action research) as part of their ongoing professional learning, as outlined in the Standards, participants encountered challenges. These were in relation to the value placed on practitioner enquiry by colleagues and context, which affected their engagement. This observation aligns with the work of Flores (2001) who talked of interactions between different, sometimes competing, viewpoints and values, and Stanulis and Burrill (2004) who suggested that perceived 'real' needs could conflict the progression of early career teachers. Unwin and Fuller (2003) talked of early career teachers moving towards those with specific knowledge for support, but in this partnership, it appeared that in some cases the support in specific school contexts was restrictive.

Whilst expansive communities of practice generally provide effective support for NQTs' professional development, the layers of mentoring support defining this partnership had the potential to act as a hindrance to some participants. Ashton (2004) highlighted that individual motivation to learn, whilst influenced by previous experiences, can be hindered by constraints within certain contexts, and it needs to be recognised that structures do not always support individual learning dispositions (Billett and Somerville, 2004). Findings pointed to poor awareness of the roles and responsibilities of all individuals involved with the mentoring of NQTs. For those mentors acting in a 'full-release' capacity, supporting NQTs in all aspects of their development, the ability to provide continuity of support, and to build relationships with the mentee were important. In addition, to use their community of NQTs to support enquiry, and to position the enquiry undertaken relative to the teaching and personal context was also viewed as important, although some identified the need to develop their substantive knowledge of enquiry. Effective mentors will flexibly marry core mentoring skills with substantive knowledge of enquiry in supporting NQTs in this context, whilst also taking account of individual context and learning dispositions. Mentoring for enquiry may be best subsumed into the role of a single mentor supporting the NQTs in all aspects of practice, thus strengthening the policy-theory-research-practice interface in more integrated fashion. Researchers have noted shifts in mentoring practice from a focus on *knowledge for practice* to inquiry into *knowledge of practice* (Langdon and Ward, 2015).

## **Conclusions and Implications**

To conclude, this research has enabled the investigation of collaborative partnership-based professional development supporting NQTs to undertake practitioner enquiry, during their induction year. Findings have pointed to benefits for participants, but also towards challenges for future partnerships to overcome: particular tensions for individuals, organisations, and systems within a partnership model of this type emerged. In the context of Scottish education, the outcomes of the study have relevance to policy-makers, teachers, and teacher educators in the wake of the Donaldson (2011) report. Whilst some of the benefits and challenges identified have clear relevance to global education systems, it is worth reflecting on the point that local, national, and international contexts will

continue to influence the development of specific partnership models.

With a view to enhancing the experiences of future NQT cohorts in the *local context*, a number of evidence-based capacity-building developments have been initiated, mainly focused on the sustainability and quality of support. One key development is the provision (by the university partner) of accredited Master's level mentoring training for a group of teachers (some of these from the NQT cohort in focus) with a view to building a population of mentors able to support the professional learning (including professional enquiry) of teachers at various career stages. Other CPD initiatives have provided communication opportunities for enhanced understanding of the enquiry initiative within schools and the roles and responsibilities therein. NQTs have had the opportunity to share their experiences of, and findings emerging from, their enquiry within their professional networks to raise awareness of the potential impact of engagement with enquiry in relation to understanding and enhancing practice. Further research will continue to track the development of partnership activity emerging as a result of these initiatives, notably operational aspects and partner learning outcomes.

At a *national/international level*, potential implications for policy-makers, research and practice may include the need to provide financial and technical infrastructure to facilitate such partnership activity in order to build mentoring capacity across the teaching profession, drawing on experience and expertise of a community of partners. This will include generic mentoring skills and mentoring to support activity in particular areas, such as practitioner enquiry. It would be important to develop layers of mentoring support for all teachers, building on all actors within the partnership, incorporating clear roles and responsibilities. It may be necessary to promote mentoring and practitioner enquiry as 'part of routine practice' for all teachers, making connections to Standards and requirements of career-long professional learning initiatives, such as Professional Update in Scotland (GTCS, n.d.b). Finally, there is the need to continue to promote the important role of practitioner enquiry and research in the development of practice, provide wider opportunities for teachers to engage with partners to support such activity, and to disseminate their work through peer group, school, and other communities.

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