Mentoring beginning teachers in Catholic schools in Western Australia: An exploratory study

John Topliss

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Publication Details
MENTORING BEGINNING TEACHERS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Submitted by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

The University of Notre Dame Australia

2 Mouat St (P.O. Box 1225)
Fremantle Western Australia
August, 2017
Statement of Sources

This thesis does not contain any published or unpublished material for which I was awarded any other degree or diploma. The sources of information from all other authors were duly recognised in the body of the thesis. This thesis was not submitted for examination in any other tertiary institution. This research followed all the rules and guidelines as directed by the University Ethics Committee.

Signed: J.W. Topliss  Date: 5/08/2017
ABSTRACT

The study identified and explored the mentoring experiences in the transition from graduate to Early Career Teacher (ECT) in selected Catholic primary and secondary schools in Western Australia. The research addressed a significant deficit, as presently the lack of a system-wide framework for the mentoring of ECTs, the cessation of the current ECT program and the limited training of mentors, has resulted in less than ideal mentoring experiences for ECTs. The study examined the perceptions of ECTs in the transition from graduate to Beginning Teacher and involved three distinct yet inter-related phases that explored the mentoring experience. The first phase sought the expectations of mentoring of a small group of final year, Primary Education students from a Catholic University in Western Australia. The second phase, the Beginning Teachers’ phase, was conducted with a group over their first three terms of teaching and examined their experiences of mentoring. In the final phase, the perceptions of Catholic primary principals were sought regarding the place and logistics of mentoring. These phases were then synthesised to provide a clearer picture of mentoring in the Catholic Education system.

The data collection methods involved both a survey questionnaire and focus group input. Descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken for each phase of the study for interpreting survey data from Post-Internship (Pre-Service) teachers, Beginning Teachers and principals. Such an approach helped to determine the numerical occurrence of concept/theme descriptors in relation to answering each of the research questions. For the purpose of addressing the research questions, focus group qualitative data were garnered via the use of both open-ended and closed questioning techniques, which were then audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data was interpreted using a Mixed Methods convergence design.

A chief finding was that the guarantee of a mentor does not necessarily alleviate every problem faced by an ECT. However, the attributes of a mentor may significantly assist or
hinder the aspirations of an ECT. It was also found that the regular feedback provided to
Post-Internship (Pre-Service) teachers became more informal as an ECTs’ careers progressed.
The importance of feedback to the vocation of both Post-Internship (Pre-Service) teachers
and ECTs indicated that further investigation was specifically required in the Religious
Education Learning Area. Significantly, nearly half of ECTs received minimal feedback from
mentors and or/principals regarding the prospect of ongoing permanency. Although some of
the ECTs received feedback in the Proficient Stage of the Australian Institute for Teaching
and School Leadership (AITSL) Standards as a Key Performance Indicator for their ongoing
employment, 54% of Beginning Teachers reported no such feedback. The lack of certainty
about their future role in the work-place impacted the relationship some ECTs had with their
mentor and/or principal. Encouragingly, the majority of principals recognised the importance
of mentoring by offering support for the instigation of a system-wide mentoring framework.

On the basis of these findings, principles upon which a new mentoring framework
might be developed are proposed. These principles might benefit principals, mentors and
ECTs, through the introduction of strategies such as school and system-based mentoring
coordinators.
Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the faith, love, hope and invaluable support of many people. I wish to acknowledge:

- Professor Richard Berlach. Your wisdom, support, feedback, counsel and knowledge has been immeasurable; I am truly grateful for your friendship and ongoing academic guidance.

- The Pre-Service teachers of The Catholic University of Western Australia; the Beginning Teachers of the Catholic Education System and the principals of Catholic Education Schools who so willingly participated in the study, sharing their experiences to enhance the journey for other future Early Career Teachers (ECTs).

- The Staff of the School of Education UNDA. To Professor Michael O’Neill, Dean of the School of Education. The professionalism I have encountered from you and your staff has been tremendously appreciated.

- The Director of Catholic Education WA, Dr Tim McDonald and the Staff of Catholic Education WA, whose assistance enabled me to meet many Beginning Teachers through the Early Career Teachers Program.

- The Principal at St Anthony’s School, Wanneroo, Mr Mark Marando and the staff, parents and children at the school, I offer my deepest gratitude to you all for your support and encouragement.

- Finally, to my wonderful wife, Jean and our beautiful children John, Pearse and Therese. Your constant love, faith, encouragement, patience, advice, humour and support was immeasurable in assisting with the completion of this PhD; along with that of the rest of our family; my wonderful loving mum, Barbara who inspired a lifelong love of family, history and learning; both my dear dads John and Jim; my wonderful sisters and their beautiful families Kelly, Michelle, Roger and Jordan; my loving aunts Bev and Kate and families; and Celine, my loving mother-in-law and her family: Fergus, Niamh and Michael. Without you all I could not have completed this thesis. I am eternally grateful for your love and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. 3

TABLE OF CONTENTS ............................................................................................... 6

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................ 10

LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................... 12

APPENDICES .............................................................................................................. 13

LIST OF ACRONYMS ................................................................................................. 14

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................... 15

Overview ................................................................................................................... 15

The Origins of Mentoring in Contemporary Education ........................................... 16

Beginning Teachers and Emotions ............................................................................ 19

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .................................................................. 24

International literature on mentoring ...................................................................... 24

National literature on mentoring ............................................................................ 26

Local literature on mentoring .................................................................................. 28

The difficulties associated with mentoring in the teaching profession .................. 31

Mentoring and the Teaching Profession .................................................................. 37

Models of Mentoring and their Possible Application for the Teaching Profession .... 40

1) New Teacher Centre - USA ................................................................................. 41

2) The Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) ......................................................... 42

3) Learning Walks .................................................................................................... 43

4) Open Doors .......................................................................................................... 44

5) Cambridge University Study: Wroxham Primary ............................................... 44

6) Three Examples of Mentoring from other Professions ....................................... 45

a) Australian Rules Football (AFL) ...................................................................... 46

b) Dental Hygienists of Ontario .............................................................................. 47
c) Instructional Rounds ............................................................................................................. 47

The Mentoring Pathway for a Graduate teacher in Western Australia ............................................ 49

Beginning teachers in Catholic Schools and their extra responsibility for teaching RE .................. 51

Teacher Dispositions and their meaning for Effective Mentoring in Catholic Education. ................... 54

Early History of Mentoring in Catholic Education in Western Australia. ........................................ 57

The Current State of Mentoring in Catholic Schools in Western Australia. ...................................... 60

The Importance of Leadership in Mentoring ................................................................................. 62

Leadership and mentoring in Catholic Schools in Western Australia. .............................................. 64

Chapter Summary ....................................................................................................................... 66

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN .................................................................................. 67

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 67

Epistemology ............................................................................................................................... 67

Methodology ................................................................................................................................ 68

Mixed methods ............................................................................................................................. 68

Theoretical framework .................................................................................................................. 70

Methods ......................................................................................................................................... 71

Extraction of descriptive categories for planning a mentoring framework. .................................... 71

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions ......................................................................... 73

Phases of the Study, Participant Selection, Instrument Selection. ................................................... 76

Phase 1: A Catholic university in Western Australia. ..................................................................... 79

Phase 2: Catholic Primary Principals’ Perceptions. ....................................................................... 81

Phase 3: Beginning Teacher Perceptions ....................................................................................... 82

Risks and threats .......................................................................................................................... 85

Data Analysis Procedure ............................................................................................................. 87

Quantitative data analysis (survey questionnaire). ......................................................................... 87

Qualitative data analysis (focus group interviews) ....................................................................... 87

Limitations .................................................................................................................................... 89

Ethical considerations .................................................................................................................. 89

Chapter Summary ....................................................................................................................... 90
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS OF SUBSIDIARY RESEARCH

QUESTIONS ......................................................................................................................... 91

Extraction and Convergence of Concept/Theme Descriptors ............................................... 92
Subsidiary Question One ..................................................................................................... 102
Subsidiary Question Two .................................................................................................... 107
Subsidiary Question Three ............................................................................................... 118
1. How was your Relationship with a Mentor? ................................................................. 121
2. How did you feel about your Teaching? ....................................................................... 127
3. How was your Relationship with your Students? ......................................................... 133

The Main Tensions Faced by ECTs and Suggestions made after Three Terms of Teaching ...... 135
1. Emotions associated with stressful situations – assessment and reporting; staff relationships;
   parent meetings; behaviour management ....................................................................... 136
2. Understanding of policies and procedures ................................................................... 137
3. Other – Permanency; ICT; curriculum; students’ perceptions of teacher ..................... 139

ECT Suggestions, after three terms of teaching, for improving the mentoring experience .......... 140
Subsidiary Question Four .................................................................................................. 141

Scenario 1. The ECT isn’t Assigned a Mentor ................................................................. 143
Scenario 2. The ECT Initially is Assigned a Mentor, however, the Relationship becomes Fractured
   or Non-existent ........................................................................................................ 145
Scenario 3. The Feedback Provided to ECTs is more Informal in Nature ......................... 147
Scenario 4. The ECT is Provided with Formal Mentoring Feedback and is Positively Influenced by
   the Attributes of the Mentor .................................................................................. 148

Subsidiary Question Five ................................................................................................. 149

Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................. 158

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS OF INTEGRATIVE RESEARCH

QUESTION .............................................................................................................................. 159

Principles for developing a Beginning Teachers’ mentoring framework ......................... 160
Principle 1: Complying with Regulatory Documentation .................................................. 161
Principle 2: Establishing the Fundamentals of Mentoring ............................................... 163
Principle 3: Recognising Mentor Attributes ................................................................. 166
Principle 4: Understanding the importance of mentor feedback to ECTs ......................167
Principle 5: Adopting a System-wide Mentoring Approach ........................................171
Principle 6: Facilitating a School-based Mentoring Approach ....................................177
Principle 7: Interfacing with Teacher Education Institutions ........................................185
Principle 8: Mentoring and Religious Education ...........................................................187
Principle 9: Mentoring in the City vis-à-vis the Country ..............................................189
Principle 10: Generating Employment Security ...........................................................191
Summary of Major Conclusions ............................................................................. 193
A Proposed Mentoring Framework ...........................................................................194
The Borromeo Mentoring Framework ......................................................................195
  1. Personal Formation and The Vocation to Teach in a Catholic School ....................196
  2. Catholic Church Influences on current Mentoring Teachers ...............................197
  3. Current Influences affecting the Mentoring of Beginning Teachers in Catholic Education ...... 198
  4. Implementing a System-based Approach to Mentoring ......................................199
  5. Influences on Mentoring Beginning Teachers from a Catholic Education Context ...201
  6. Implementing a School-based approach to a Beginning Teacher Mentoring Program ....202
BMF Foundations Summary ....................................................................................203
Summary of Chapter Five .......................................................................................207

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS ............................................. 209

APPENDICES ...........................................................................................................233
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1. Common Elements in Key Mentoring Research ................................................................. 36
Table 2.2. Diocesan participation in 2014 Catholic Schools ............................................................. 60
Table 3.1. Theme Descriptors Related to Developing a Framework for Effective Mentoring as Identified in the Literature .................................................................................................................. 73
Table 3.2. Research Details ................................................................................................................. 78
Table 3.3. Principal Participation Data ............................................................................................... 82
Table 3.4. CEOWA Trial Beginning Teaching Meeting Dates and Participation 2013 .......................... 83
Table 4.1. Phases of the Study and Location of the Data for answering Research Questions .............. 92
Table 4.2. QUAN Survey descriptors and their Identification in Each Phase of the Study ................ 94
Table 4.3. QUAL Focus Group Interview descriptors and their identification in each Phase of the Study (from Dedoose) .......................................................................................................................... 95
Table 4.4. QUAN + QUAL Percentage Tally of Converged descriptors ........................................... 98
Table 4.5. Four descriptors that Surfed in All Phases of QUAN + QUAL Analysis ............................ 99
Table 4.6. CUWA and ECT Identifying their Mentoring Experience as Assisting their Teaching (Simple Count) ........................................................................................................................................... 103
Table 4.7. CUWA and ECT Survey Responses Relating to Mentoring Benefitting or Hindering their Teaching (Extended Response). ........................................................................................................... 104
Table 4.8. Open-ended Responses to the Relevance of Mentoring to Career Aspirations .................. 105
Table 4.9. CUWA and ECT Coded Responses (by Theme) of the Value of Mentoring for Career Aspirations .................................................................................................................................................. 105
Table 4.10. Mixed Methods descriptors and their Identification for the CUWA Phase of the Study ...... 108
Table 4.11. Five descriptors identified in the CUWA Focus Group Interviews about their Perceptions of Mentoring ............................................................................................................................................ 110
Table 4.12. Four Main Mentor Characteristics Identified in CUWA Survey Data .............................. 111
Table 4.13. Mixed Method Descriptors and their Identification for the ECT Phase of the Study .......... 119
Table 4.14. Characteristics of an Effective Mentor as Identified by the Three cohorts in the Study. ...... 124
Table 4.15. Types of Feedback Provided to ECTs after Three Terms of Teaching ......................... 126
Table 4.16. Phases that best Described an ECTs Journey after Three Terms of Teaching ................ 131
Table 4.17. Mixed Methods descriptors and their Identification for the Principal Phase of the Study ...... 150
Table 4.18. Principals’ Response Regarding Feedback Focus. .............................................................154

Table 5.1. Principles Identified in the Data Relating to Specific Subsidiary Questions and their Significance for each of the Three Cohorts in The Study. ..........................................................161
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1. QCS Component 305 rating description ................................................................. 30
Figure 3.1. Mixed Methods (MM) Triangulation Design: Convergence Model ....................... 70
Figure 3.2. Theoretical Framework for the Study ..................................................................... 71
Figure 3.3. Conceptual Framework .......................................................................................... 75
Figure 4.1. Mixed Methods Convergent Model ...................................................................... 102
Figure 4.2. CUWA Teacher Perceptions of Feedback during their Internship .......................... 112
Figure 4.3. Areas of Feedback provided to CUWA Teachers on Internship ......................... 113
Figure 4.4. CUWA student recognition of a Mentoring Program for ECTs in their School .......... 114
Figure 4.5. Level of Support given to CUWA teachers from their Mentor/Supervisor ............. 115
Figure 4.6. Types of programs CUWA Post-Internship teachers found useful during their Internship .......... 116
Figure 4.7. Combined City Primary and Secondary Beginning Teachers’ Relationship with their Mentor .......... 122
Figure 4.8. Combined Country Primary and Secondary Beginning Teachers’ Relationship with their Mentor .......... 122
Figure 4.9. Stages of the School Year when Mentoring was of Most Assistance to an ECT .......... 125
Figure 4.10. Combined City Beginning Teachers’ perceptions of how they felt about the Profession after Three Terms of Teaching ................................................................. 128
Figure 4.11. Combined Country Beginning Teachers’ perceptions of how they felt about the Profession after Three Terms of Teaching ................................................................. 129
Figure 4.12. Combined City Beginning Teachers’ relationship with their Students after Three Terms of Teaching .............................................................................................................. 134
Figure 4.13. Combined Country Beginning Teachers’ relationship with their Students after Three Terms of Teaching .............................................................................................................. 135
Figure 4.14. Main Areas of feedback provided to Beginning Teachers ..................................... 145
Figure 4.15. Principal survey responses on who provided feedback to Beginning Teachers .......... 154
Figure 4.16. Types of support provided to Beginning Teachers in their first weeks of teaching ................................................................. 156
Figure 5.1. ECTs CEOWA Leadership Program Pathway ......................................................... 173
Figure 5.2. Structure for developing a System-based Mentoring Coordinator’s role .................. 177
Figure 5.3. Positioning of the School Mentoring Coordinator at the researcher’s school .................. 182
Figure 5.4. Role of a System-Wide Mentoring Liaison Officer ................................................ 185
Figure 5.5. Borromeo Mentoring Framework ......................................................................... 205
APPENDICES

Appendix A. Letter asking permission to collect data from CUWA Dean of Education.....234
Appendix B. Ethical Approval from CUWA.................................................................235
Appendix C. Letter seeking permission to approach Principals addressed to the CPPA
    President.................................................................................................................236
Appendix D. Ethical Approval from CEOWA..............................................................238
Appendix E. Participant Information Sheet provided to all Participants in all 3 Phases
    of this Study............................................................................................................239
Appendix F. Informed Consent Form provided to all Participants in all 3 Phases of
    this Study.................................................................................................................241
Appendix G. CUWA Survey on Survey Monkey. .........................................................243
Appendix H. CUWA Focus Group Interview Script. ......................................................248
Appendix I. Principal Survey on Survey Monkey..........................................................251
Appendix J. Principal Focus Group Interview Script......................................................254
Appendix K. Beginning Teachers Survey: March/April 2013......................................258
Appendix L. Beginning Teachers Survey: August/September 2013..............................263
Appendix M. Beginning Teachers Focus Group Interview: March/April 2013.............267
Appendix N. Beginning Teachers Focus Group Interview: August/September 2013.....271
Appendix O. Beginning Teacher Self Reflection Questionnaire......................................274
### LIST OF ACRONYMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACER</td>
<td>Australian Council of Educational Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFL</td>
<td>Australian Football League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AITSL</td>
<td>The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACE</td>
<td>The Alliance for Catholic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATP</td>
<td>Assistant Teacher Program (equivalent to internship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPPA</td>
<td>Catholic Primary Principals Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEOWA</td>
<td>The Catholic Education Office of Western Australia</td>
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<td>CEO</td>
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<td>Catholic University Western Australia</td>
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<td>Department of Education Western Australia</td>
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<td>DOTT</td>
<td>Duties Other Than Teaching</td>
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<td>Head of Professional Practice</td>
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<td>Mentoring and Specialised Help Unit</td>
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<td>NCEC</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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