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

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CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the mentoring experiences in the transition from graduate to Early Career Teacher (ECT), in selected Catholic primary and secondary schools in Western Australia. The study also explored the level of support ECTs were receiving and investigated the possibility that quality mentoring, with the assistance of leadership and system support, could assist Beginning Teachers to begin their professional journey with greater ease. The overall importance of providing mentoring and giving feedback to ECTs was highlighted by numerous authors as presented in the literature review chapter (for example, Hudson, Skamp & Brook, 2005; Jensen & Reichel, 2011; McNally & Blake, 2008, 2012).

The use of mixed methods in this study involved the combination of survey and focus group data being collected in three phases representing three cohorts (CUWA internship students; Beginning Teachers and principals) to determine the current state of mentoring in Western Australian Catholic education. The convergence of data in each of the three phases of the study led to key descriptors being identified and the subsequent appearance of ten conclusions, which were presented in chapter five. The study found that some 20% of Beginning Teachers were without a mentor for at least their first three terms of teaching. Where as mentor was present, the type of feedback provided differed markedly depending upon the commitment and personal attributes of the mentor. Feedback for pre-service teachers focused mainly on teaching and learning, and behaviour management within the context of social (informal) conversation. Although such emphases are important, the paucity of more formal and hence robust feedback often resulted in the novice not receiving an in-depth analysis of the multitudinous factors that might affect their transition for novice to
competent practitioner. Interestingly, both ECTs and school leaders ranked behaviour management and learning about school policies and procedures as key areas that needed to considered be during mentee debriefing sessions. Accordingly, when envisaging the creation of a mentoring program, these two areas would need to be included in both mentor and mentee training considerations. Consequently, the study concluded that further investigation was warranted on the types of feedback provided to ECTs, the format which debriefing sessions should appropriate, and appropriate sequencing in terms of the coverage of content.

The study found that the feedback provided in the area of Religious Education was minimal, at best. An understanding needs to be fostered that through their own witness ECTs can be a significant influence on their students’ understanding of Religious Education through their involvement in school prayer activities, Christian service programs, Mass attendance and involvement with wider parish sacramental celebrations. Again, additional investigation is required to address this deficit and to suggest how mentoring in Religious Education can be redressed, given that it is the priority learning area in Catholic schools. Further, it is considered that purposefully aimed system-based mentoring programs in Religious Education Accreditation for ECTs could further assist their formation to teach Religious Education.

It was found that ECT concerns about permanency and lack of information about how to achieve permanency contributed to early career dissatisfaction. For example, ECTs did not feel that they were supported by either the CEOWA or the school in understanding system-based continuing employment requirements; neither did feel that they were provided with sufficient information regarding APST standard. Currently, nearly 46% of ECTs indicated that they are without support in negotiating the APST and how these are related to seeking permanency. Any information that was available seemed even more difficult to access for those practicing in country schools. A related concern for those in country schools was that
geographical and contextual challenges meant that they often lacked confidence in their teaching and were less likely to receive mentoring opportunities in comparison to their city counterparts. Attending to concerns such as these might also enhance the recruitment of ECTs to country areas, and encourage them to stay longer.

It has been identified throughout this study that principals are a key stakeholder in implementing mentoring programs and many are doing so in conjunction with their School Improvement Plan. One principal in the focus group interview commented on the inherent value of mentoring Beginning Teachers to make them ultimately more self-reliant,

… one of the other things with the mentoring it seems like the mentoring goes for a couple of years or goes for a year and then stops. The one thing sometimes that you wish that was there was the networking between the people getting mentored. So that over time they almost become in control of their own personal growth and professional growth and keep those lines of communication open. So, it’s no longer people mentoring them they are then sharing those experiences amongst themselves. {Principal 12}

Many principals envisaged a system-based framework that might assist them in mentoring their ECTs. Some principles noted that system-wide guidelines and support would assist them with funding a school-based mentoring co-ordinator. Currently, funding and providing time for mentoring is at the discretion of each school principal, and when money is tight, developing an effective mentoring program might not be seen as a high priority.

Encouragingly, the study found that some 25% of principals have already established the role of mentoring coordinator, so further commitment at a system-based level would likely boost this number much higher. The CEOWA could also capitalise on accessing the resources that already exist in 25% of Catholic schools. Collaboration between regional school leadership teams and the CEOWA in developing a school-based mentoring coordinator role, could potentially yield another benefits such as the development of on-line mentor training modules, mobile MASH units (Mentoring and Specialised Help) regional ECT support teams, online induction handbooks, and shared mentor/mentee assessment and engagement tasks.
All of these resources could then be linked to the APST and SCASA documentation to better inform ECTs in their career development. The suggestion was also made that in terms of workplace transition, such might be further enhanced through the creation of a liaison mentoring coordinator, independently employed by the Catholic Archbishop of Perth, through an educational agency such as the Catholic Institute of Western Australia.

The principles upon which a new mentoring framework might be developed, based on the findings from the present study, was proposed in the previous chapter. Such principles underpin a framework that could benefit Catholic Education Offices, principals, mentors and ECTs, through the introduction of both school and system-based mentoring protocols. The present research found that the lack of a system-wide framework for the mentoring of ECTs, the cessation of the current ECT program, and the lack of training for mentors, resulted in less than ideal mentoring experiences for ECTs. The data revealed that geographical complexities, types of feedback provided and aspirations of individual ECTs’ all had a significant bearing on the ECT mentoring experience. The study identified four distinct mentoring experiences an ECT might encounter when they began their teaching career, namely,

1) The ECT is not assigned a mentor;

2) The ECT is assigned a mentor, however the relationship becomes fractured or non-existent;

3) The feedback provided is more of an informal nature; and

4) The ECT is provided with effective mentoring feedback emanating from a positive mentoring role model that positively influences the novice teacher.

Given that option four is clearly the preferable experience, the research findings were used to motivate a mentoring framework that might be utilized in Catholic education and beyond. An implication as a direct result of the research undertaken in this work which resulted in the
proposal of the BMF, may entail the author designing a future action research project to
gather prospective data from ECTs, mentors and leaders about the influence, through the
intervention of the BMF, on the teaching of Religious Education.

In summary, the major recommendation from this study is the development of a
system-based program that supports school-based mentoring programs for ECTs. Such a
program would be cognizant of the principles identified for developing a mentoring
framework and would then utilize the framework for developing a mentoring program that
delivers effective and sustainable mentoring experiences for ECTs. The program would then
need to have scope for accommodating variation as determined by school context. It has been
recommended that an accompanying training program for mentors be based on the on the
Borromeo Mentoring Framework (BMF). The adoption of the BMF might lead to the
desirable situation that has been identified by Sunde and Ulvik (2014), who declared,

Mentoring seems to hold the potential to transform the teaching profession,
revitalise experienced teachers…it is thus not only beneficial for new
teachers. Yet the influence of mentoring depends on the quality of the
mentoring and on support from both the school culture and school leaders (p. 285).

In creating a platform for system-wide mentoring protocols, the BMF envisages the creation
of three key mentoring support roles:

- An independent mentoring liaison officer linking the three educational arms of
  Catholic Education in Western Australia, the CEOWA, the CUWA, and Catholic
  schools;
- A CEOWA mentoring coordinator responsible for overseeing the development of a
  mentoring program for ECTs and mentors;
- A school-based mentoring coordinator responsible for localized mentor training
  and program evaluation.

Finally, and based on the study findings, the following recommendations are made:
I. The creation of support personnel positions as identified in the three dot points above.

II. The establishment of a mobile ECT MASH (Mentoring and Specialised Help) Unit. The quick deployment of such a team, could be used as a system-based support mechanism for principals having difficulty accessing experienced teachers to act as mentors for their ECTs, especially in the regional areas of Western Australia.

III. The exploration of a specific unit of study by the CUWA, that has a focus on ECTs willing to teach and be mentored in country schools.

IV. The examination by CEOWA of the current Head of Professional Practice Program (HOPP) unit at the CUWA, for the potential use of the program in the wider application of training mentors.

V. The introduction of joint online and external learning modules by CEOWA, that could be used for both mentor and ECT training.

VI. The creation of a network of regional mentoring coordinators, who once trained, instruct school-based mentoring coordinators on strategies for training individual school mentors. Such training may assist an ECT with their acquisition of key classroom competencies and be linked to the APST.

VII. The establishment of a Notre Dame University (USA) style ACE training and mentoring program that could attract ECTs in hard to staff schools in Western Australia.

VIII. The specific provision of Religious Education Accreditation programs that could be incorporated into a newly designed Early Career Training program; and
IX. The creation of a CEOWA Teaching/Faith/Social (TFS) committee with an Executive formed from members of an Early Career Teacher program who meet with the Executive of the CEOWA to plan network opportunities for ECTs in teaching, faith and social areas.

X. An investigation by a group sourced form CEOWA, CUWA and ECTs, of how mentoring is being conceived of in other countries, and how successful programs might be translated into the Western Australian Catholic school context.

At the heart of mentoring ECTs, is establishing and nurturing the personal vocation to teach which can be achieved by following in the footsteps of Jesus, as was highlighted by two influential Catholic Leaders. First, the present Catholic Archbishop of Western Australia, Timothy Costelloe, who summarised the importance of ECTs and Catholic Education,

It is both my hope and my aim that every Catholic school primary or secondary, and our Catholic University…, are places of educational excellence where our young people are provided with the very best education possible…I want them to be provided with the best facilities possible, with the most qualified and talented teachers and administrators available. I want them to be leaders in educational methods…I also want to say that our schools and our university cannot be and will not be all this if God is not the heart and soul of all our educational institutions (Costelloe, 2013, p. 7).

and second, Pope Francis who stated,

All utopias include not only a description of an ideal society but also an analysis of the mechanisms or strategies that could make the utopia possible. We could say that it is a projection into the future that tends to return to the present to take a vividly outlined shape and, then looks for the right mediations to make it a reality (Rossa, 2013, p. 60).

Successful education always begins with grand and noble visions. Effective mentoring of ECTs is a key way of making such visions a reality in Catholic schools.