EVALUATING A PEER MENTORING SCHEME FOR HIGHER LEVEL TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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Abstract

Developing supportive relationships in the workplace has been a key component of the induction of teachers into professional practice and peer mentoring has been used effectively at this developmental stage. However, no such structure has been available to Teaching Assistants and Higher Level Teaching Assistants working in schools and any mentoring they do receive tends to be incidental, unplanned and undertaken by teacher colleagues rather than peers. In terms of developing the school workforce and ensuring that all school staff have access to appropriate support for learning in the workplace, there are issues of how the distinct but complementary role of the TA/HLTA in the Remodelled School Workforce can be supported and developed.

This study seeks to evaluate a locally devised formalised peer-mentoring scheme for Teaching Assistants (TAs) who are seeking to gain Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status. The scheme was developed in response to a perceived need for support for TAs aspiring to HLTA status to be provided by peers who not only understood the complexities and scope of their role, but also understood the requirements for gaining HLTA status. In particular the study seeks to determine if training and working as a mentor impacts on workplace learning and the status and the professional identity and standing of HLTAs within schools both from their own and their employers perspective. By adopting a case study approach this study focuses on 40 HLTA mentors who were trained to mentor TA colleagues in maintained primary and secondary schools in the North West during 2006/7 and reports findings from their and their employers’ perspectives. The theoretical framework within which this study is being investigated includes views of learning in the workplace (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Symes & McIntyre, 2000; Eraut, 1994; Solkin, 2006; Beaney 2006), notions of professional identity (Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Eraut, 1994; Englund, 1996; Bottery, 1998; Dillabough, 1999; Hargreaves, 2000), the concept of the learning organisation and learning networks (Senge, 1992; Day & Hadfield, 2004; Gronn, 2000) and the idea of mentoring as professional development for the mentor (Dymock, 1999; Billet, 2000; Darwin, 2000).

Introduction

The present changing landscape in schools, in terms of changes to working practices and transformation of roles (Dfes 2002) is an opportune time for consideration of what we regard as professional learning, professional knowledge and professional status in terms of the school workforce. In the case of the induction of teachers into the profession there has been an acknowledgement for a number of years that trainee and new teachers benefit from having a mentor in the workplace (DfEE 1992), but opportunities for support staff to profit from a similar relationship have not been available. In the case of TAs no formal training, induction or mentoring structure has been customary, although informally teacher and other colleagues may have offered support to individuals in an extemporized manner. However, the diversity of practice between schools in terms of deployment
of TAs and the lack of a national framework for professional practice and development has meant that initiation into the role in one institution does not necessarily benefit a TA who moves to another institution. Furthermore, it could be argued that providing teacher mentors for TAs will not necessarily be helpful in terms of providing professional guidance into a role which is complementary to, but distinct from, that of a teacher. There has been a recent move to offer national induction training to TAs through Local Authorities which requires a colleague (usually a teacher) to act as a mentor within the school setting. The emphasis in this instance is very much on training, focusing primarily on ensuring TAs have an understanding of the national curriculum subjects which they will be supporting. In this context the role of the mentor is very much one of supervisor and facilitator in terms of managing the work of the TA and acting as a conduit linking the new recruit to school processes and staff, and is consequently focused on the acquisition of occupational competence rather than on developing professional aptitude.

Historically continuing professional development in schools has been focused entirely on teachers, but the Training and Development Agency for Schools (formerly the Teacher Training Agency) now has a remit to develop the capacity of the wider school workforce. The advent of Workforce Reform in schools (Dfes, 2002) has meant that TAs now have more opportunities to develop professionally through work-based National Vocational Qualifications available through Further Education Colleges, Foundation Degrees offered by Universities and by achieving HLTA status funded by the TDA through Local Authorities. The standards for gaining HLTA status are closely aligned to those for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and candidates for the status are required to identify how their present practice corresponds to these standards by completion of specified written tasks. Over the last three years, 18,600 HLTAs nationally have been awarded the status and are now working in primary and secondary maintained schools in England (TDA, 2007). For those providing the preparation programmes for TAs seeking to gain the status it was evident that support within the workplace was a crucial factor for successful completion. However, it was also apparent that support offered from teacher colleagues was not always appropriate as their understanding of the HLTA process and the specific requirements for gaining the status and, indeed, the role of the TA/HLTA in school was not always accurate. Some providers started to explore the concept of mentor training for those who had gained HLTA status to enable them to mentor colleagues aspiring to the status. Subsequently a short two-day mentor training programme was developed by one provider in the North West to address this perceived need and five Local Authorities within the region encouraged HLTAs in their schools to participate.

The case study focuses on evaluating this mentor training programme which was delivered over a one-year period between 2006/07 and involved 37 candidates from both primary and secondary maintained schools in the North West. The study aims:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of the peer mentor system from the perspective of the mentor, particularly in terms of their own learning in the workplace
- To investigate the impact on mentors’ perception of their status within the workplace and the development of their professional identity
To assess the value of peer mentor networks in terms of developing professional practice
To make recommendations regarding the mentoring programme

Mentoring for Learning in the Workplace

A mentoring relationship with a more experienced colleague is acknowledged as being of particular benefit in workplace learning (Billet, 2000, Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2006) and opportunities for staff to participate in mentoring relationships can benefit both individual and organizational learning. To enable all staff within schools to benefit from a mentoring relationship in this way emphasis should be on providing environments where these relationships can flourish (Carter & Francis, 2001), perhaps within the emerging learning networks described above. One such environment is already provided for new teachers in that a formal mentoring process is in place within a formalized institutional structure and focuses on a planned timetable of observations, meetings, monitoring and assessment. If this relationship at the beginning of a teacher’s career has been supportive, it is often subsequently supplanted by a more informal, unplanned and incidental relationship with a more experienced colleague at a later stage of career development.

In terms of learning in mentor relationships, part of the process is helping those involved to bring their knowledge into conscious awareness (Watkins & Marsick, 1993), making the tacit explicit. This can be a challenging task for both parties involved but can be a highly productive one in terms of learning in the workplace. Assisting a colleague to become cognizant of their own practice is the role of the HLTA mentors who are the focus of the case study. Their relationship with their peer TAs is a structured and short-term one in which both parties are working towards the specific goal of gaining the status for the TA, but where the mentor plays no part in the assessment process. For these TAs this process can be a transformational one as they are asked to match their practice against nationally devised standards. They often report that undertaking this process helped them to value their own practice and to recognize the expertise and professional knowledge which they possess but may not have focused on in the midst of the ‘hot action’ of the classroom (Eraut, 1994) which leaves little time for reflection. Both for the mentor and the mentee the relationship can provide increased knowledge and reflection concerning the role of the HLTA/TA in different settings and can widen horizons significantly and be an opportunity to develop the critical and personal skills mentioned above. Additionally, for the HLTA mentor it can be a way of consolidating learning (Braun & Schmidt, 2006). In this situation working with colleagues who have insight into the specific role of the HLTA within schools can be very productive for those involved. For, as Burke, McKeen and Mckenna (1993) suggest, mentoring relationships between peers who are similar in terms of intelligence, approach to procedures, background, ambition, educational achievement etc, are more likely to result in positive supportive experiences for both mentor and mentee. Conversely, mentoring relationships between individuals who are dissimilar can result in negative mentoring experiences (Eby, McManus, Simon & Russell, 2000).
Furthermore, ownership of the learning process, which can be crucial for generating energy and enthusiasm for practice, (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001) is often lacking because of their position within the hierarchy of the school and the ambiguity of their role. The lack of a strong vocational identity may impact on their perception of the importance of acquiring new knowledge and their confidence in their own ability to generate new knowledge as part of a learning community (Billett, 2000). Hodkinson & Hodkinson’s (2006) suggestion that a strong collaborative culture through sharing and exchanging knowledge and information is vital to effective learning is particularly pertinent to this group as they are often excluded from entering the community of practice of teacher colleagues or they may belong to a ‘bootlegged’ community (Wenger 1998) lacking legitimacy or recognition in the workplace. For both teachers and TAs being part of a learning network in a learning organisation can bring them into contact with colleagues with whom they can share and develop practice which can form a useful part of professional development.

**Learning Organisations and Learning Networks**

In terms of developing a learning orientation within the workforce it is not only the quality of the workplace in terms of collegiality, collaboration and sharing of professional expertise which is vital for workforce professional development, but also the social and cultural mores of the institution which can impact on how effective it is in this respect (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2005). Those fortunate enough to be placed in an institution which values and promotes continual professional learning and in which the social and cultural climate supports this, will benefit from the experience. However, it must be acknowledged that not all workplaces offer an optimum experience for their employees in this respect and opportunities to ameliorate the situation by expanding professional engagement with colleagues through the development of learning organizations and within learning networks are being explored within educational institutions (eg Cluster Groups, Education Improvement Partnerships, Federated Schools etc).

The principal feature of a learning organization is the capacity of the workforce to learn, not as a discrete activity limited to a few individuals within the organization, or only at particular times in terms of career development, but across the workforce as part of everyday work. Learning together and working towards goals which they have helped to create can create a synergy within the organization which can have a transformative effect both at the individual and organizational level (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). In this way learning becomes part of the culture of the organization and is embedded within the structures and relationships of the workplace (Boud & Solomon 2001). To be successful the learning also needs to be conceived and developed as a shared enterprise with a commonality of purpose and shared vision from those involved. If personal and organizational goals are not aligned, then team working and learning may be compromised, indeed empowering the individual within a low alignment team can lead to the worst outcomes for both (Senge 2006). For teams to work well together to create a synergistic learning opportunity for members there needs to be a high degree of ‘operational trust’, where team members can be counted on to act in ways which complement each others’ roles (Senge 2006). For this to be effective team members may have to suspend what Arygis (1985) calls the ‘defensive routines’ or habitual ways of interacting which may have been developed
to protect the status quo and prevent challenge to normative behaviour. There also needs to be a degree of control over work-related decisions to enable those involved to commit to the change and growth which this type of learning inevitably involves (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). The fast pace of change being experienced in schools presently and the top-down governmental constraints within which schools operate, may make it difficult for staff to adopt the predispositions described above which are necessary for a learning organization to flourish. Additionally, where schools have hierarchical structures this can make it difficult, particularly in terms of teachers and TAs and HLTAIs working closely within the classroom. Of particular concern in this respect is the lack of clarity surrounding the role of the TA/HLTA which has evolved in a somewhat ad hoc and unplanned way, and may have a deleterious effect on building a functioning, synergistic team which can share existing, and produce new knowledge.

Developing a learning community at the organizational level can expand the knowledge base available to the workforce and accessing a wider learning network of institutions can increase in individual’s access still further to a larger group of knowledgeable colleagues working in different contexts within a formalized structure. A wide range of benefits of participation in learning networks (Day & Hadfield, 2004; Kahne et al, 2001; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Lieberman & Wood, 2003) have been identified. Indeed, the importance of collaborative working across institutions as a means of raising standards in schools has been highlighted by the Government in recent strategies (Primary National Strategy Learning Networks, Education Improvement Partnerships and Every Child Matters for example) and opportunities for teaching staff to come together to share ideas, resources and to offer mutual support are increasing. In this way the ‘horizontal development’ of staff is addressed as the individual becomes aware of and is able to inhabit a variety of contexts (Gruille & Griffiths, 2001) and work with colleagues to jointly co-construct knowledge (Jackson & Temperley, 2006).

Nonetheless, regardless of the perceived benefits which may accrue in terms of staff development, developing networks between schools can be a challenging enterprise as schools are complex organizations within themselves and developing networks between schools increases the complexity in terms of organizational and managerial control. For networks to be successful there needs to be an acknowledgement of the tensions between systemic (organizationally controlled) and individual (personally empowered) development (Day & Hadfield 2004). For school staff who have been subject to increasing governmental control of both the curriculum, assessment and institutional governance and management, there may be a perceived gap between the ‘rhetoric’ of school life presented by governmental agencies and the ‘reality’ of their experience, that is between ‘espoused theories’ and ‘theories in use’ (Argyis & Schon 1974). This may in turn prevent staff from feeling emotionally confident within the environment of the network, thus negating the conditions necessary for successful sharing, i.e. respect for others’ expertise and willingness to ‘inhabit each others’ castles’ (Somekh, 1994). To date the emotional and personal aspects of working within networks has not been well researched (Day & Hadfield 2004), the assumption being that providing the infrastructural conditions within which school staff can meet is sufficient to ensure a sharing of practice. This last point is particularly pertinent when examining who the gatekeepers and facilitators of learning networks are – for if the structures within the networks simply
replicate the hierarchical structures of schools, those staff who make up the wider school workforce may not have, or perceive that they have, access. For a learning network to be successful the expertise of all the staff needs to be captured and access to this knowledge via the network needs to be viable for all. The case study examines the experiences of a group of HLTA Mentors in terms of their access and engagement with colleagues through formal networks and how this impacts on their learning.

**Case Study**

This is a piece of on-going research following the career trajectories and professional development of 37 HLTAs working in primary and secondary maintained schools in the North West of England. These HLTAs undertook locally devised peer-mentor training in 2006/7 to enable them to support TA colleagues who were working towards gaining HLTA status. The training was developed in response to a perceived need that support for TAs be provided by peers who not only understood the complexities and scope of their role, but also the requirements for gaining the status.

The role of the HLTA is a new one within the school workforce and the role is often ambiguous and ill-defined. Professional development within this context can therefore be problematic and may be unplanned, ad-hoc and largely self-directed. The overall study will examine the career trajectories and professional development over a period of two years of a group of HLTAs who are acting as peer mentors for colleagues and as such are part of both formal and informal networks. This paper will report on initial findings in phase 1.

**Methodology**

To generate detailed insights it was felt important to use a qualitative methodological enquiry giving the potential to explore processes in action (McCracken, 1988, Oppenheim, 1992) and to seek to understand how individuals and groups interpret meanings within their own context to enable them to make sense of complex and ambiguous situations (Cohen & Mannion 1996). The approach used is a case study one to enable an empirical investigation of the specific phenomenon relating to professional development within the particular context of TA/HLTAs in a reformed school workforce. Using case study as a methodological strategy in this way is intended to enable the research to adopt an evaluative position to inform future practice (Stake, 1994) by offering an insight into the phenomena of the changing role of HLTA within a remodelled school workforce. As an evaluative tool the research sets out to portray events within the natural setting, describe and interpret what is happening in order to inform thinking (Bassey, 1999) in terms of the changes taking place particularly in terms of provision of professional development.

The sample is a purposive one (Robson, 2002) as they comprised those who had previously gained HLTA status and work in maintained primary and secondary schools in the North West region. All the respondents were female within the age range 31-55 and had between 7 and 24 years experience of working in schools.
Data collection

Questionnaires, one-to-one semi-structured interviews and email interviews were used to elicit responses from both HLTAs and their employers in order to aid triangulation and validity of results (Denzin, 1988). The responses from the questionnaires were coded with reference to the main themes of the conceptual framework described previously and sub-themes were developed from these (Stake, 1995) and these themes and sub-themes informed the questions asked in the subsequent interviews. A combination of face-to-face one-to-one semi-structured interviews and email interviews were held with a self-selecting sample from the questionnaire respondents and these interviewees were asked to nominate an employer representative who would be willing to be interviewed face-to-face.

Initial Findings

There were 23 responses from the 37 questionnaires which were distributed which represents a response rate of 62%. Of the 23 respondents 17 (74%) were from Primary schools and 6 (26%) were from Secondary schools. Of these respondents 55% reported that they had been given the opportunity to mentor a colleague following the mentor programme and of these 75% were from the primary sector.

In terms of sharing practice with other mentors, 57% of respondents reported that they had not had this opportunity, however, there were a significant number of respondents, 43%, who did have access to a formal network of mentor colleagues. There were also 35% of respondents who reported having access to an informal network and 6% reported having access to both. In the open questions in the questionnaire communication by email was cited by a number (8) of respondents as an efficient way to keep in contact with colleagues. Increased confidence, awareness of role and a developing professional identity as an HLTA were themes which were evident in the open question responses, and these areas were followed up in the face to face and email interviewing.

The effectiveness of the peer mentor system in terms of learning in the workplace was talked about in the interviews in terms of increased confidence and esteem which the mentor felt acting as a mentor to colleagues had given them. This often resulted in an enhanced job role and is demonstrated in the following comments:

*Having HLTA means that people know I have it – they know I am part of the network in Cheshire and this enhances my standing, as I am going out quite a lot (to mentor colleagues) .. not long after I had been accepted on mentoring group, head took great delight in telling governors, she was so proud we had gone down this route. She often mentioned it how important it was, she saw it as a good thing for school as well as my professional development.*

(HLTA primary D)

*It has certainly now given me a recognised identity which is evident when I attend meetings with outside agents* (HLTA secondary, M)
Mentors talked about how acting as a mentor had developed their own learning, exemplified by the following comments:

It also gives insight into other schools and their practice (HLTA small rural primary talking about mentoring colleagues from other schools J).

One of the main things for me was it made me realize what I do well, it has been reflective tool for me, made me look at how far I have come in terms of management and organization for example ..... (HLTA city primary talking about mentoring student teachers K).

Having contact with colleagues had been an important part of their own development and continued to be so, this is illustrated in the following comments:

But we do give ideas and talk about it, say I did this session, someone might say I did it this way. We bounce off each other – in the infants we do talk a lot about our work. The TAs and the teachers, we get lots of feedback (HLTA city primary B).

I have learned from others all my life – life is a learning curve! I constantly ask other people’s advice and share ideas I am open to suggestions (HLTA city primary A).

I attend network meetings which are held once every half term, and we share information and ideas (HLTA secondary school talking about her role as SENCO for the school and her involvement with a network which consists of teacher colleagues who also act in SENCO role in their school D B).

I have picked up a lot from teachers as well, observing them ..... I have found working with teachers useful, I have picked up things which I can use. I have always asked questions to teachers and they have always been willing to explain ..... (talking about TAs she mentors) ..... talking to them, observing them and with creative ideas as well – I have worked with TAs who have been extremely creative, we have sparked ideas off each other (HLTA small rural primary J).

I learned a lot from the teachers I worked with, from everybody, I am still learning, every teacher is different, talking to other TAs, watching, observing, seeing how it all comes together, asking them, they are happy to share with me (HLTA rural primary Ky).

In fact one participant maintained that informal learning in the workplace from colleagues has been the sum total of her professional development in the 7 years she has been undertaking the TA and now the HLTA role. She has undergone short CPD programmes in the workplace, but has not gained any nationally recognised qualifications (eg NVQs) and has no plans to undertake any in the near future. Her comment below illustrates her feeling about how she has been inculcated into the role by colleagues:
I think it is natural (to know what to do) the old head thought that, either you have it or you haven’t. I modeled myself on a teacher here, who is wonderful, I learn from them. I observed what they did, picked it up, the ethos of the school. Not a mentoring relationship, they weren’t aware I was using them as a model. I picked it up, what she did, how she dealt with groups. I asked questions always, explain if I don’t understand something, people have been really helpful (HLTA rural primary S)

In terms of participating in networks of learning, the results were variable. Some mentors are members of formalized, local authority funded and led mentor networks which they value hugely. Comments on this as follows;

... HLTA mentors, we discuss our own schools, ideas or what they do, it's nice to get out and talk and even sort problems out as a group, they help each other. It's a community of practice, supportive peers, as there are only 8 of us we get on really well, listen to each other, give advice and we take it from each other. We are all same level doing same job – it is important that we are all the same. It is a learning opportunity as well as a support (HLTA primary Ky).

We discuss practice, the training we have had has been very useful. The training for HLTA mentor role which has been ongoing has been very useful, also looking at applications (for TAs applying for HLTA status) being able to be part of a team, SENCos, teachers, heads that has been very useful, quite a responsibility looking through them and giving opinion (HLTA small rural primary, J).

...we have 5 days every term which is funded our schools are given money for supply cover so we can be released (to attend formal HLTA mentor network established by LA representative) Initially Pauline (LA rep) suggested I get in touch with my local colleague, but we have actually become good friends. I have been to her school and she has been here, we also have colleagues in the wider group who are from secondary and we have shadowed them and this has been good..(HLTA primary, D)

Others had difficulty accessing appropriate networks, or queried their appropriateness for them:

The network, we didn’t get a great deal out of those 2 meetings, maybe if we had gone more regularly we would have got something out of it (city primary B)

I am aware of TA network, I did got to one meeting as if there is a TA issue here people come to me or my other HLTA colleague here, but I found that because I work in a proactive school and privileged in the authority I found that it was a bit of a moanfest –(city primary K)
In terms of school-based learning networks or clusters, there didn’t seem to be a great deal of engagement for these staff, although most were aware that their school was part of such a network, few saw this as something which could enhance their learning or contact with peers.

Some of the respondents are working in challenging circumstances in terms of school reorganizations and amalgamations and there does still seem to be some residual resentments regarding hours and salaries. However, there was a feeling of their allegiance to their community as a factor in the commitment they felt to their school.

Time was mentioned as a particular problem, as more and more are being used to cover PPA for teachers, time out of school can be problematic. Attendance in their own time at network meetings didn’t seem to be an attractive proposition as they didn’t see what benefits would accrue to them personally.

There was agreement that learning from others by observation, discussion and role-modelling was key to their own development, however, opportunities for them to work with other TA/HLTA colleagues do seem to be limited and this may have an effect on the conception of the role as a discrete one distinct from the teacher role. Their main source of this type of informal learning seems to be teacher colleagues and most talked of very supportive relationships in this respect. Some did comment on how the ambiguous and ill-defined nature of their role can be problematic and lead to misunderstandings with teachers, but most felt their relationships were based on mutual respect and support.

Discussion

It was evident that gaining HLTA status and subsequently training as a mentor had enhanced the perceived status of many and mentoring colleagues was viewed as a valuable learning opportunity for the mentor. Furthermore, HLTAs in the study greatly value the informal learning context and acknowledge the impact this has on their professional development. The majority of this learning is both unplanned and unintentional and it is usual for teacher colleagues to be the source of the learning.

Access to external learning has become more difficult for some HLTAs with the advent of PPA (preparation planning and assessment) time for teachers and the resultant requirement in some schools for cover from this group. It was also evident that ambiguity in terms of the HLTA role is very common and context specific interpretation of the role is widespread. This makes it very difficult for HLTAs and their employers to conceive of their development in ‘career terms’, but rather focuses it on the immediate needs of the particular school. This may also cause tensions with teacher colleagues who are responsible for day-to-day management of HLTAs work and who are the gatekeepers to providing opportunities which can develop learning and skills within the workplace.
Opportunities to share practice with other HLTAs are limited in some instances and seem dependent upon external drivers and financing. However, those who did engage with a professional network were positive about the benefits. In terms of developing a workforce which can meet the needs of integrated services for children and families, opportunities to share experiences and knowledge need to be extended to all staff.

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