



The Ethical Role of the Student Teacher Mentor: The Unspoken Moral Dimension of Initial Teacher Education?

Julie Taylor

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



Abstract

This paper considers the role of the ethical in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) mentoring from the perspectives of practising mentors and their student teachers on a one-year postgraduate teacher education programme led by a UK university. Despite the recognition that teaching is an unavoidably ethical endeavour, the lack of explicit moral content within teacher education programmes has resulted in a gap in the literature when considering the mentoring of student teachers through a moral lens. This study therefore aims to raise awareness of this important and neglected aspect of teacher education.

Introduction

Despite education having a necessary and long-standing association with character and virtues (Arthur, 2003), there remains a lack of focus on ethical content within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes (e.g. Arthur et al., 2015a; Jubilee Centre, 2015; 2017; Kristjansson, 2015; Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2011). Whilst it is recognised that the autonomy of ITE providers in England, UK may be constrained by the directives of the latest Ofsted agenda (Ofsted, 2020), the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2013) and the ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019a)¹, the consequences of omitting a moral element from teacher education courses are significant. With a focus aligning more towards compliance, course content can become overly-concerned with the technicalities of classroom competence, leaving little room for the altruistic aspects of teaching that inspire trainee teachers to join the profession (Sanger and Ogusthorpe, 2011).

Whilst it is widely accepted that education has an unavoidable ethical dimension and teachers have an indisputable moral responsibility (Campbell, 2000), with postgraduate programmes

¹ The Initial Teacher Training Core Framework outlines the minimum entitlement for trainee teachers and there is an expectation by the DfE that providers will incorporate the content into their programmes.

being the most prevalent entry route to teaching (DfE, 2019b), and the drive towards school-led teacher training routes in England, UK, the proportion of time on school placements significantly outweighs university input. This imbalance places considerable responsibility on school colleagues to support the development of trainee teachers and whilst university provision will continue to be a contributing factor, the role of the school and in particular the school-based mentor in teacher education is elevated to an increasingly important status. When reviewing plans for future mentor development within our department and exploring the potential benefits of conceiving mentoring through such an ethical paradigm, it became evident that there was a lack of literature explicitly focused on the moral nature of ITE mentoring. Therefore, this study will aim to add to the existing character education literature by providing insights into this underrepresented and important area.

Research for this paper was undertaken in the ITE department of an English Russell Group University. The department offers both Core and School Direct PGCE routes, with the option to specialise in Early Years (3-7) Primary (5-11) or Secondary (11-16). In 2019/20, the student cohort consisted of 89 trainee teachers, each of whom were allocated a mentor in their host school, where they were based during the Autumn and Summer terms. In the Spring Term trainees were placed in a different school or Early Years setting for their complementary placement and assigned a different mentor. In a typical year, the School Direct taught programme consists of a pre-course induction week and one day a week of input either at university or delivered locally (for the Derby and London cohorts), with the rest of the academic year spent in school (approximately 150 days). However, it should be noted that the 2019/20 cohort referred to in this study was significantly impacted by Covid-19, with school placements being suspended in March 2020. From mid-March onwards, the majority of trainees completed their PGCE via online learning and did not have any further

experience in school before starting their NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) role in their employing schools².

Mentoring in an ITE Context

Since the 1980s, there has been recognition in the field of ITE that mentoring plays an important role in the development and identity formation of novice teachers (Hobson, et al, 2009; Korthagen, 2004; Marable & Raimondi, 2007) and an acknowledgement that mentors have the responsibility of modelling the values of the profession (Arthur, Davidson and Moss, 2003). However, with the aforementioned drive towards school-led teacher training raising the profile of the school-based mentor, there has been increased interest in the significance of ITE mentoring (e.g. Brondyk and Searby, 2013; Lofthouse and Thomas, 2014), particularly due to the recognition that the mentor is likely to be a significant, if not the most significant, influence on a trainee's personal and professional development and their understanding of what it means to be a 'good' teacher.

Mentors play an important role in the development of their mentees (Korthagen, 2004; Marable & Raimondi, 2007), but there remains considerable variation in the quality of experience for trainee teachers in ITE partnerships (Lofthouse and Thomas, 2014). With mentor development predominantly focusing on the administrative and technical aspects of the role and little attention given to professional and moral growth (Harrison and Khatoon, 2017), it becomes questionable as to whether ethical regard is attributed to ITE mentoring, even though the moral nature of the role is generally acknowledged from a teaching perspective (Arthur et al. 2015; Jubilee Centre, 2015)

² with the exception of salaried trainees who continued to support key worker and vulnerable children in their schools on a rota basis

Professionally, mentors can have a positive impact on the socialisation of trainee teachers and play a key role in supporting them to adapt to both the professional requirements of being a teacher and the contextual expectations within their placement schools (Wang and Odell, 2002). Studies also suggest an ITE mentor is likely to have a positive impact on classroom organisation; time and workload management (Lindgren, 2005; Malderez et al. 2007; Hobson et al., 2009) and a positive influence on subject knowledge and competence in effectively catering for the needs of all learners (Cordingley and Buckler, 2012). Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, the impact of the mentor on trainee's personal growth is also evident in the literature (Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent, 2004) with evidence of psycho-socio enhancement (Mullen, 2011); increased self-esteem and improved self-reflection skills (McIntyre and Hagger, 1996).

ITE mentoring is multi-faceted and the meaning and aim of the role is contested. Mentors approach the role with different motivations and intentions, seek to attain different outcomes, and achieve these through different means and actions. Whilst some variation is expected and should not necessarily be viewed in a negative light (Lofthouse, 2018), the lack of a universal definition and an agreed conception of the role has led to ambiguity, with some definitions of mentoring describing those involved; some focusing on mentor/mentee behaviour; and others focusing on the mentoring process (Brondyk and Searby, 2013). Consequently, the boundaries between mentoring and other supportive roles can become distorted (Crow, 2012).

The nature of the current ITE assessment model has reinforced a hierarchy between mentor and mentee, with mentors required to assume the fundamental role of the 'gatekeeper' to the profession (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Providing mentors with the power to "sanction another into a community" elevates the mentor to the "apex" of the teacher community and "signals

the status of mentor teachers as experts of practice” (Davies, 2005). This again serves to reinforce the expert/novice conception, with trainees being acutely aware that the judgement as to whether they meet the required standards to gain their QTS predominantly lies with their mentor.

The Ethical Role of the ITE Mentor

Even for the few ITE providers who do aim to embed some form of moral development within their university provision, it is important to consider that however ethically-informed the content may be, the impact on trainees on a one-year PGCE programme may be minimal if there lacks a recognition of the ethical on their school placements. As the English Teacher’s Standards are largely concerned with “doing rather than being” (ACSL, 2019: p.31), it is to be expected that mentors’ views of professionalism may lean more towards disciplinary rather than aspirational (Harrison and Khatoon, 2017), with compliance (regulation) being prioritised over professional judgement (responsibility) (ACSL, 2019: p. 29). Subsequently, trainees may resort to conforming to school codes of conduct to avoid the consequences of doing things in the ‘wrong’ way, rather than being supported to develop a deeper sense of professional identity and integrity informed by their own values and beliefs (Carr, 2000; Strike and Soltis, 1992).

With such a conceivable influence on their mentee, it is necessary to consider the ethical principles and personal virtues embodied by mentors that can contribute to successful mentoring relationships. The overriding virtues that emerge within the literature are those of compassion and care. Atjonen (2012) considers the ethics of care as meaning that mentors must be “genuinely mentally present, close at hand and available” (p.41) and for Gilligan (1982) this involves mentors taking others into consideration and avoiding causing any hurt. As emotions and ethics are intertwined within mentor-mentee relationships (Ferrari, 2004),

emotional vigilance is key (Clarkeburn, 2002) and empathy must be demonstrated, so mentors can be sensitive to their mentee's needs (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011) and are able to "to diagnose and recognise various emotions" in both their mentee and themselves (Atjonen, 2012: p.41).

Other virtues that emerge in the literature as contributing towards a positive relationship include: justice in the sense of fairness and equitable mentoring practices (Moberg and Valesquez, 2004); the need to be people-centred, supportive and respectful (e.g. Bergman, 2004; Barnett, 1995; Warren, 2005) and to commitment to act with integrity and courage (Wilson and Johnson, 2001). Where student teachers in Atjonen (2012)'s study believed they had experienced good ethical mentoring practices, they also made reference to their mentors acting with integrity and fairness and being loyal and committed to their development. As research affirms that behaviours cultivated during professional training correlate with future professional behaviours (Papadakis et al., 2005), trainees are likely to be susceptible to emulating both ethical and unethical practice. It is therefore important for mentors to recognise that role modelling is "uncritically embedded" in the professional identity of a teacher (Jones, 2007: p.187) and therefore becomes an inevitable aspect of their daily work.

When mentors recognise the necessity of being a positive moral influence for their mentee and nurture their desire to apply learnt virtuous habits to their developing classroom practice (Jubilee Centre, 2017), this effectively challenges the expert-novice mentoring relationships so prevalent in ITE, by acknowledging the need for autonomy and self-motivation to effectively stimulate and inspire adult learning (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005). If we ultimately aspire to an ethical mentoring model with an "emphasis on empowering and enabling [mentees] to do things for themselves" (Clutterbuck, 2004: p. 11), this cannot come into fruition if trainee teachers find themselves experiencing "inherent inequality" in their

mentoring relationship (Knight and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012: p.103). Such a misuse of power can lead to a trainee's preoccupation with pleasing the mentor, subsequently resulting in an erosion of "any genuine desire to explore personal strengths and weaknesses" (Atjonen, 2012: p.42). Therefore, if personal as well as professional development is to be valued, it is clear an alternative and more facilitative approach which enables greater autonomy for the mentee should be explored.

If we propose a conception of mentoring as being a "deeply personal learning process during which nobody can learn on behalf of another person" (Atjonen, 2012: p.40), this suggests that the mentoring is likely to have greater effect on personal and professional development if mentors conceive their core purpose as being a coach and facilitator of reflective practice (Claxton, 2004). Coaching, as opposed to more transmissive styles of mentoring, could be seen as more effectively supporting the nurturing of a trainee's teacher identity and fulfilling their responsibility to empower their mentee to find their own way to 'be' a teacher. Effective use of open-ended questioning and the encouragement to verbalise their thought processes can help a trainee develop critical reflection skills so they are able to recognise their own areas of strength and weakness and understand the influence their personality and values can have within the classroom (Atjonen, 2012).

Whilst approaches such as principle-centred coaching and the role modelling of virtuous practice identified in the aforementioned literature are certainly applicable to the mentoring of trainee teachers, it should be noted that little research currently exists that explicitly focuses on the ethical in an ITE mentoring context (McDonald and Hite, 2005). Although no UK-based research could be sought in relation to this theme, two international studies considering the ethics of mentors from the perspectives of student teachers were found (Atjonen, 2012; Alnord, Mwanza and Cosmas, 2017), with one additional Israeli study (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011) centring on ethical dilemmas as a means of exploring the

conceptions of mentors. With such a clear and evident gap in the literature, this paper will aim to add to this neglected and important area by further exploring the ethical in ITE mentoring from the perceptions of practising mentors.

Methodology

Data for this paper was collected through an online survey and semi-structured interviews between March and June 2020 during Covid-enforced lockdown in England, UK. By the time the survey was sent out, the trainees had undertaken a full Autumn Term placement and 10 weeks of their Spring Term placement prior to the Covid enforced placement suspension. An electronic survey created using *Qualtrics* was sent to all Primary/Early Years School Direct mentors on our partnership mailing list who had mentored Primary or Early Years School Direct trainees on at least one placement. The aim of the survey was to extrapolate how mentors perceive the nature of their role and what part, if any, the ethical plays in this perception.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted following an analysis of the survey data and encouraged both mentors and trainees to view mentoring practice through an ethical lens, by considering the role and purpose of the ITE mentor and sharing perceptions of what it means to be an ethical mentor based on their personal experiences of mentoring or being mentored. Both were also asked to reflect on the potential barriers that may hinder consistent ethical practice and how mentors could be better prepared for the ethical aspect of their role to inform recommendations for future practice. Some of the follow-up questions built on the emerging themes from the survey (e.g. the role of the mentor as a role model) whilst some encouraged the exploration of themes identified in the literature (e.g. mentor support for ethical dilemmas).

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis from the survey and interviews led to the emergence of three key themes which proved particularly significant in participant responses:

i) The ITE Mentor as a Virtuous Professional

Where mentors more broadly considered their perceptions of the nature of their role in the survey, the findings illustrated that mentors conceive their role in many different ways.

Whilst it was hoped there would have been greater emphasis on the ethical, it was to be expected that mentors would perceive their roles and responsibilities differently Butler and Cuenca (2012). Whilst some clarity within an ethical paradigm would be beneficial, research shows it is not necessarily detrimental when trainees experience more than one mentoring model, particularly when different approaches are applied at different stages of their development (Lofthouse, 2018).

However, with direct or indirect references to the ethical being subsidiary to the focus on the more technical and measurable aspects of the role in a number of survey responses e.g. the co-ordination of the placement and assessment against the Teachers' Standards, this does prove significant as a lack of ethical awareness could affect the likelihood of ethical mentoring practice. Where professionalism was acknowledged, this was often interpreted as adherence with professional codes of conduct, as opposed to a more ethical interpretation of what it means to be a professional. Whilst the limitations of small sample from a sole ITE provider would suggest further research would be needed to draw conclusions about generalisability, there is a likelihood that this conception of professionalism may be representative of the views of mentors more generally, as it aligns with the ongoing concerns about education (including ITE) being overly focused on compliance (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010).

This narrow view of professionalism may be reinforced by an inadequate focus on moral development in ITE (e.g. Kristjansson, 2015; Sanger and Ogusthorpe, 2011). Therefore,

without a specific focus on the ethical in most ITE programmes, mentors' views on what it means to be a professional are unlikely to be conceived within a moral paradigm and, as in the case of our institution, a dichotomy emerges between mentor perceptions and our character-focused conception of professionalism.

This failure to recognise the link between professional codes of conduct and the need to develop an understanding of moral principles in practice (Campbell, 2008a) becomes evident when mentors attempt to comment on trainee's professional behaviours in their half termly assessment profiles. Despite a clear reference in Part 2 of the Teacher Standards for trainees to demonstrate 'high standards of ethics' (DfE, 2013), this is rarely acknowledged and instead, comments focus more on the perfunctory aspects of professionalism such as attendance and punctuality. Consequently, where university input on moral development is lacking, even trainees whose professionalism has been judged as being exemplary are unlikely to have developed the moral agency needed to navigate the complexities of the profession.

However, it should be noted that when mentors prioritise the more instrumental aspects of the role, it cannot be assumed that mentors do not promote ethical practice, particularly given the general recognition by teachers of the moral nature of their work (Arthur et al., 2015). It could however be inferred that due to a continued lack of ethical guidance for teachers in comparison with other professions (Sanger, Ogusthorpe and Fenstermacher, 2013), coupled with the over-emphasis on the technicalities of teaching by ITE providers (Carr, 2016), that even when approaching the role with good intentions, mentors may have not developed virtue knowledge and reasoning and the mastery of moral language (Sockett and LePage, 2002) which would enable them to consistently and intentionally apply virtuous practice to their mentoring work.

This view was further reinforced by the survey findings when mentors were asked to select the virtues most significant to their role. Whilst it was encouraging to see priority given to moral virtues over the other virtue categories provided, the comments justifying the virtue selection predominantly perceived the virtues within an education-specific context e.g. honesty was often linked with honest feedback as opposed to the viewing of honesty in a wider sense. Mentors' reasoning rarely described the virtues in the way they were defined in the glossary provided and whilst it is unknown the extent to which mentors referred to the glossary, survey responses appeared to show a lack of clarity regarding mentors' interpretation of the virtues. The education-specific nature of the responses also suggests that, as teachers, mentors may also perceive virtues differently from other professions. Therefore, to ensure mutual understanding between school and university, it could be argued that mentor development should also contain an explicit moral element to supplement the ethical content students received through the university taught programme.

ii) The ITE Mentor as a Moral Exemplar

As expected, all mentors recognised the need to act as a positive role model for professional practice but few mentors in the survey made reference to this from an ethical stance, with a number of qualitative comments suggesting the need for mentors to assume the role of an expert practitioner. Whilst it is unquestionable that trainees do need to observe consistently good classroom practice as part of their training, the advocacy of a hierarchical relationship with the mentor as the expert and the mentee as the novice can lead to negative repercussions (Knight and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). When experienced by trainees, this imbalance resulted in feelings of anxiety ensuing from the belief that they could not effectively emulate the quality of practice being demonstrated. Of particular concern were instances where trainees were fully aware they were witnessing unethical mentoring practice, but felt unable

to raise any concerns due to feelings of inferiority and subordination in the mentor-mentee relationship.

Interviews revealed that where mentors were more attuned to their ethical responsibilities, the importance of being a moral exemplar (in addition to being a model of good classroom practice) was well understood, perceiving this important role as a necessity for the moral development of individual trainees and the greater good of the profession as a whole. Where mentors were considered to consistently embody ethical practice, trainees reflected extremely positively on the influence these mentors had on both their personal and professional development, with many believing that learning from such positive moral exemplars had influenced the kind of teacher they want to be.

Unfortunately, the findings demonstrated these positive experiences were not consistent for all. On a positive note, a number of the interviewed trainees had been able to compare positive with negative experiences to enable them to formulate an understanding of what ethical mentoring should look like. However, it should be noted that due to the embedding of character and moral development in our taught programme, our trainees may have greater ethical awareness in comparison with those training at other institutions. It therefore cannot be assumed that all trainees would be able to draw positives from weaker mentoring practices. As evidenced in the literature, poor mentoring can have a detrimental impact on both the development and retention of novice teachers (Menter et al., 2010) and as interviewees themselves recognised, if trainees fail to recognise weak mentoring, they may unknowingly emulate poor ethical practice themselves (Arthur et al. 2015).

It is challenging to draw conclusions about why some mentors fail to act as a moral exemplar, as no mentor is likely to describe themselves as unprofessional or unethical but a couple of hypotheses are worth considering. As discussed earlier, this could be attributed to a general lack of understanding of professional ethics and a failure to appreciate the need to serve as an

ethical role model, hence the belief that effective co-ordination and assessment of the placement is synonymous with effective mentoring. Alternatively, for some mentors, adopting the role of a moral exemplar (Damon and Colby, 2014) may be perceived as a “heavy ethical burden” (Luntley, 2011: p.41) and one expectation too many when there lacks sufficient time to engage with even the basic training requirements for a PGCE student. However, it is clear in the literature that mentors have a key role to play ‘in showcasing their ethical knowledge’ (Campbell, 2003: p.142) and have a moral responsibility to support the habituation of the virtues (Sanderse, 2012; Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2013) so, once again, this highlights the need for more explicit moral development for both mentors and teachers if we are to shift perceptions and aspire for a more consistent ethical mentoring experience for all trainees.

iii) The ITE Mentor as an Ethical Coach and Facilitator of Critical Reflection

The final key concept that emerged from the findings related to ethical coaching and reflection. Where mentors intentionally adopted a coaching approach, either as a result of the university training, or due to a coaching ethos being a part of their school’s culture, trainees believed this to have had a positive impact on their development. Where trainees believed their mentor had allowed them the autonomy to make their own judgements and develop their unique teacher identity, this was perceived as being good ethical practice. In line with the view that teaching differs from other professions by being a “deeply personal process” (Atjonen, 2012: p. 40), interviewees recognised the value of trainees being guided to develop their own interpretation of teaching, as opposed to being unethically inculcated to replicate their mentor’s practice.

From a moral perspective, coaching was particularly beneficial for trainees when quality time was allocated for reflection on character in addition to the evaluation of teaching practice. Based on evidence that more effective outcomes can be achieved through a collaborative reflection that takes into account more than one moral standpoint (Husu and Tirri, 2001), coupled with the recognition that trainees have limited experience of critical reflection and are likely to need support (Emslie, 2009), it is clear mentors have an important role to play in the self-reflection process. This is affirmed in the literature with Short and Rinehart (1993) considering the mentor as the catalyst for critical reflection and Daresh and Playko (1991) asserting that a core purpose of being a mentor is a commitment to providing expertise in critical thinking. This becomes particularly significant if we recognise the value of practical wisdom (phronesis) and view teacher education as a means of preparing the teachers of the future to “adjudicate conflicting demands in order to do the right thing at the right time” (Harrison and Khatoon, 2017: p.5).

One approach identified by mentors to support the development of phronesis was to coach trainees to reflect on authentic ethical dilemmas encountered on their placements. Some mentors were able to recount examples where they had guided trainees to apply virtue-based reasoning to situations which “require flexible and sensitive judgement in context-variable professional circumstances” (Cooke and Carr, 2014: p. 91), but again, this good moral practice was not consistent. Trainees do receive designated time for reflection on ethical dilemmas as part of the university taught programme, however, the high proportion of time spent in school for School Direct trainees suggests that the university input needs to be supplemented with similar reflective practice in school if trainees are going to be equipped to exercise measured professional judgement (Blond, Antonacopoulou and Pabst, 2015) to ethically resolve the challenging situations they will encounter throughout their teaching career (Campbell, 2011).

Interestingly, mentors who highly valued an ethical approach to mentoring also made reference to the wider benefits of self-reflection for their own development. In contrast with the notion of assuming the role of the expert, as referenced earlier, mentors believed it was necessary to demonstrate humility, modelling that learning is an ongoing process for teachers and reinforcing the notion that even experienced practitioners need to invest in their own development. Although evident that little time is allocated to reflection on character in schools generally, (Arthur et al., 2015), where schools did facilitate opportunities for personal reflection, mentors believed this had contributed to their growth as a person and subsequently impacted on how they viewed themselves as a mentor. Although difficult to impose from a university perspective, it could be considered that mentor engagement in character-related self-reflection does have the potential to positively impact on ethical mentoring provision.

Recommendations:

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been identified which are applicable to my own institution and ITE providers more widely:

Time and Recognition: Schools need to recognise the importance the role ITE mentoring plays in the greater good of the profession and subsequently give recognition to those undertaking the role. Mentors should be entitled to dedicated time each week to enable them to fully commit to the role alongside their other responsibilities.

Mentor ‘recruitment’: Schools need to make informed decisions about who is best placed to be an ITE mentor and not assume that experience is synonymous with the ability to become a good mentor – the willingness to do the role and the commitment to demonstrate good ethical practice are more important factors to consider when deciding who should best support a trainee.

Professional Training: Universities, schools and alliances have a responsibility to ensure all mentors working with trainees have received training. Training should move beyond basic placement expectations, advocating approaches that promote and encourage trainee autonomy. Development materials should also aim to incorporate an explicit focus on ethical practice to complement the content of the university taught programme. Training should also be provided for all university colleagues who undertake school visits to ensure consistency of expectations for mentoring provision.

University Taught Programmes: University taught programmes should include explicit ethical content to ensure all new teachers understand what it means to be a virtuous professional, equipping them with a level of ethical understanding that will enable them to effectively navigate the complexities of the profession.

Reflection: ITE providers should provide designated guided reflection opportunities at key points during the PGCE for trainees to reflect on authentic dilemmas and for trainees to reflect on their own character. To ensure moral self-reflection is also given necessary attention in school, universities need to promote its significance through mentor training. Wherever possible, mentors should also be encouraged to reflect on their own practice through an ethical lens to encourage ongoing personal development.

Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that teaching is a moral profession (e.g. Campbell, 2003; Sockett, 2012; Jubilee Centre, 2017), yet despite research ascertaining that teachers do indeed recognise the moral nature of their role (Arthur et al., 2015; 2018), those working in education are rarely given the opportunity to reflect on their role from an ethical standpoint. Whilst the bureaucratic challenges that may hinder a more holistic approach to curriculum design are acknowledged, the lack of opportunities for moral development created by schools

and ITE providers continues to be of concern (Harrison and Khatoon, 2017; Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010; Jubilee Centre, 2015). However, with ethics and teaching seeming “inherently compatible and unavoidably intertwined” (Campbell, 2018b: p. 358), a failure to perceive what it means to be a ‘good’ teacher within an ethical paradigm can only prove to be detrimental for the profession.

The recent move towards school-based training has brought further challenges for ITE providers (Ten Dam and Blom, 2006). In addition to ensuring compliance with the latest government directives, the increased amount of time trainees spend on school placements has further narrowed the content of university taught programmes, resulting in many ITE curricula focusing heavily on the technicalities of the profession, as opposed to the moral matters which originally attract teachers to the profession (Sanger, Ogusthorpe and Fenstermacher, 2013).

However, it should be noted that with school experience dominating the PGCE year, even when the ethical is viewed as a necessity by ITE providers, there is the potential that any positive impact from the university may be undermined, unless schools adopt a similarly ethical approach where a trainee’s moral development is valued alongside their teaching competence. Schools therefore have a key role to play in influencing a trainee’s moral growth and ensuring they witness consistently high standards of ethical practice. Being a consistent and significant factor in a trainee’s development, much of this responsibility lies with the school-based mentor. Despite the proven impact ITE mentors can have (Bullough, 2012; Lofthouse and Thomas, 2014), very little attention has been given explicitly to the ethical nature of the ITE mentor’s role in the existing literature. Research has considered what it means to be a ‘good’ teacher but not yet given the same regard to what it means to be a

‘good’ mentor within an ITE context. Yet as this study illustrates, the implications of ethical and unethical practice can be significant.

Although only a small-scale study, useful insights can be drawn from the findings of this study regarding ethical mentoring practices within teacher education. Findings revealed that a lack of clarity of the purpose of mentoring and variation in the way mentors perceive, recognise and understand their moral responsibilities can lead to variation in trainee experiences. Where mentors perceived themselves as virtuous practitioners and acknowledged their moral responsibilities, high standards of ethical practice were considered to be an inherent part of all facets of their daily work. When mentors recognised their duty to assume the role of a moral exemplar, this influence was used to guide, nurture and empower trainees to navigate the complexities of the profession.

Although trainee perceptions provided some understanding of how ethical and unethical practices influenced their school-based learning, it is clear that further research is needed to draw more pertinent conclusions about the impact of ethical mentoring on trainee development. It is also evident that ITE providers and schools need to work in partnership to create shared aspirations of “moral and practical excellence” (Arthur et al., 2015: p.29). What can be learned from this study is that the ethical is highly significant for all those who work in education and the same high expectations of professional behaviours that are held for trainee teachers should also be expected from those who mentor them. After all, being a moral educator is a challenging endeavour, but is “one from which teachers cannot, and should not, be excused” (Peterson and Arthur, 2020: p. 35).

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