Co-planning lessons: experiences of mentors and beginning teachers

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Abstract

Typically, student-teachers are expected to plan lessons on their own and a study by Mutton et al. (2011) identified several key difficulties that beginning teachers face when trying to do so. This article outlines the findings of a case study in which two teacher mentors and their student-teachers trialled the mentoring strategy of co-planning for four weeks to investigate to what extent the strategy could address these difficulties. Participants reported that co-planning enabled student-teachers to think differently about lesson planning as their focus shifted away from the content they were going to deliver toward a consideration of what learning they wanted the pupils to achieve. Co-planning also became a means for mentors to share their tacit knowledge of teaching and thus enabled student-teachers to anticipate what may happen in a lesson and thus plan for responsiveness and greater flexibility. It also gave student-teachers confidence to try new approaches and afforded mentors an opportunity to reflect on their own practice.

Keywords: Educative mentoring, co-planning, student-teacher, formative, pedagogical content knowledge.

Introduction

During their teaching practicum, student-teachers are typically left to plan their lessons on their own (Schwille, 2008). They are then observed by their mentor when they teach this lesson and receive feedback afterwards. The mentor tells them of strengths and areas that could be improved and the student-teacher hopefully takes the advice on board when planning their next lesson - on their own. Essentially, student-teachers are expected to improve their ability to plan their lessons by learning from their mistakes (Feiman-Nemser & Beasley, 1997). Yet, as Twiselton et al. (2018) concluded in their study of student-teacher progression, these 'traditional methods of supervision (observation followed by feedback) are often inadequate' (p.76). Indeed, in '*Classroom Observation'*, O'Leary (2020) is highly critical of lesson observations and argues they are born out of managerial and appraisal processes rather than as a tool to enable the professional development of student-teachers. He raises many concerns regarding the validity and reliability of the observer's feedback, as well as the artificial environment that is created because of the observation itself. Furthermore, the extent to which the feedback received from one lesson will be applicable to the next is questionable and Puttick et al. (2021) found much of the feedback student-teachers received was generic and based on procedural issues. There is therefore a clear problem; the current strategy employed

to help student-teachers improve their lesson planning is rooted in trial and error and potentially unreliable, generic and exclusively summative feedback.

Co-planning a lesson is a mentoring strategy that involves discussion between the mentor and student-teacher about the lesson *before* it is taught by the student-teacher. During a co-planning meeting the mentor and student-teacher work together to plan the lesson and therefore the student-teacher can participate in the lesson planning alongside an experienced practitioner who explains the rationale behind their thinking. The mentor may be able to share their knowledge of common misconceptions pupils may have about a particular topic or concepts that pupils often struggle to understand or many other vital pieces of information the mentor has learnt through their own experience. In this way the mentor is able to expose the hidden factors that influence their decisions when planning a lesson and the key point for the student teacher is that this conversation takes place before the lesson, rather than after. Co-planning in this way sits under a broader approach to mentoring referred to as educative mentoring (Feinman-Nemsar, 1998) which requires a shift in how we view the role of the mentor. The educative mentoring approach in teacher education is summed up neatly by Pylman (2016) when she writes:

> *"It is no longer enough to just open up a classroom and let interns practice, but mentor teachers need to recognise their educative role and the importance of planning for intern learning in situations such as co-planning sessions." (p.63)*

Essentially, educative mentoring proposes that teacher mentors are required to view themselves as not only teachers of children but also teachers of student-teachers. Rather than being reactive, educative mentors are proactive and identify where the trainee's learning needs are greatest, and they plan strategies to support them accordingly. A paper by Mutton et al. (2011) provides us with specific insight into the learning needs of beginning teachers when planning lessons. Their 3-year longitudinal study of 17 beginning teachers identified three specific difficulties experienced by student-teachers when planning lessons on their own, namely: they had a lack of knowledge of the learners, an inability to embrace flexibility in the lesson and a lack of confidence which impacted their willingness to try different teaching strategies. The aim of my research was to investigate to what extent co-planning may be able to address the three difficulties identified by Mutton et al. (2011).

Research into mentoring strategies is a current and pressing issue in England because draft guidance published by the UK government in December 2021 stated that from September 2024 all providers of teacher training must establish a network of expert mentors who will provide 'opportunities for purposeful practice and high-quality feedback… [using an] approach to mentoring based on the best available evidence.' (DfE, 2021 p.22-23). The onus will therefore be on providers of teacher training to design and deliver a mentoring curriculum that is research-based. Such a stipulation and emphasis on the importance of high-quality mentorship has not been made in previous Initial Teacher Education (ITE) guidance documents and so the need for research in this area is clear.

Method

This research aimed to build on the previous work of Mutton et al. (2011) by investigating the perceptions of co-planning from the perspectives of those involved.

It was based within a qualitative paradigm as this is particularly apt when studying how people (in this instance, the mentor and student-teacher) interact with each other within a particular setting (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, as noted by Wexler (2019) there are few studies that explore how working alongside a mentor may contribute to the "instructional moves of novices during induction" (p.214) and Creswell (2009) suggests that due to its exploratory nature, a qualitative approach is most suitable for investigating any such under-researched area.

Purposive, maximum variation sampling (Cohen et al. 2018) was used in which invitations to participate were sent to 15 pairs of student-teachers and their mentors (henceforth referred to as dyads) from schools that represented a range of contexts. While research into three dyads was planned, only two mentors replied to volunteer to participate. This formed dyad A, comprising student-teacher Nadia and mentor Carys and dyad B, comprising student-teacher Danni and mentor Clara. The dyads were given a month to conduct weekly co-planning sessions, and both managed to complete three in that time. Interviews were used for data collection as they allowed the opportunity to investigate the meanings, motives and feelings (Bell, 2018) of the participants and thus aligned with the qualitative paradigm. A naturalist stance was chosen (Silverman, 2014) as the interviews sought to elicit authentic accounts of subjective experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were used as they allow participants to talk freely within a structured framework while still enabling the possible discovery of unanticipated views (Silverman, 2014). By using a semi-structured interview, it was possible to develop a rapport with the participants and clarify any misunderstandings they had. This therefore helped develop an accurate understanding of what they each believed (Cohen, et al. 2018) and as such this method was closely aligned with the chosen qualitative paradigm (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Online video conferencing was used for the interviews due to the significant practical benefits of them being inexpensive and easier to organise than in-person interviews. It also meant participants could be selected from schools further away than may otherwise have been able to due to travel times involved (Archibald, 2019) and thus improved inclusivity (Oliffe, 2021). The ability to record the interviews allowed a richer set of data to be collected as non-verbal communication was also able to be captured (Mukherji & Albon, 2018) as well as the audio.

Thematic analysis was used when analysing the data as it is a strategy that is particularly accessible to novice researchers and can be used to report on the experiences and the reality of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is also an approach commonly used when analysing interview data (Silverman, 2014). To try to ensure credibility the researcher's interpretation of each interview was sent to the participant so they could verify that it was true reflection of what they meant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that this process of seeking participant feedback is 'the most critical technique for establishing credibility' (p.314). All participants subsequently confirmed they were satisfied with the researcher's interpretation of their interview.

Findings and Analysis

Visualising the lesson

Both dyads felt that co-planning had helped the student-teachers to visualise how the lesson would turn out in practice. Danni, the student-teacher in dyad B stated:

> *'You know what? it became a bit clearer. Like, I could visualise it [the lesson] a bit better, whereas when I plan on my own. It's so weird to explain. Like, it will be a little bit blurry. Whereas, if I'm planning it with her [the teacher mentor], I would have like clear visions of how this is going to work.'*

Danni felt that the input from her mentor during lesson planning helped remove her uncertainties around how all the different elements of the lesson would come together. When planning alone she suggests that she feels doubt over what to do as she is not sure what will happen whereas planning alongside the mentor helps her to anticipate how the pupils will react and progress through the different parts of the lesson. She went on to describe how her mentor would share her knowledge of common misconceptions pupils often bring with them to the lesson or which concepts they tend to find particularly difficult to grasp during the lesson. What Danni is referring to is the fact that her mentor possesses what Shulman (1986) described as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Shulman explains that, among other things, PCK includes 'the understanding… of the conceptions and preconceptions that students bring with them to the learning' (p. 9) and this appears to be what Clara, the mentor, was able to provide during the co-planning sessions. Similarly, Carys, the mentor from dyad A explained:

> *'We were pre-empting some of the things that [the pupils] might find difficult and allowing [Nadia] to think about it before [she's] actually in that situation.'*

Again, the key word here is '*before',* as it highlights how student-teachers can only get access to this hidden knowledge of where pupils are likely to struggle during co-planning before the lesson has been taught. It would not be possible to share this knowledge in an observation feedback conversation taking place after the student-teacher has taught a lesson. This therefore supports John's (2006) assertion that co-planning may be an effective tool for allowing access to the expert knowledge of the experienced teacher.

Carys, further explained the advantages of having discussions during the planning stage when she said:

> *'It is kind of just asking her [the student-teacher] to think about what that might be or what that might look like or what's going to happen or, or how are they [the pupils] are going to respond [and asking] 'So what would you do if this then occurred?'*

The mentor felt able during co-planning meetings to establish with the trainee the need for flexibility. Mutton et al. (2011) argued that this is key in enabling student-teachers to understand teaching as a responsive process based on the needs that arise during the lesson rather than teaching being a product or process that is delivered to the pupils no matter what happens during the lesson. Indeed, responding to needs as they arise is an idea Schön (1987) termed 'reflection in action' as the student-teacher learns to plan for greater flexibility as they acknowledge they may need to change their approach 'in the moment' to enable

continual improvement (Pylman & Bell, 2021). Thus, what the student-teacher is possibly gaining from co-planning is access to the hidden knowledge that experienced teachers have; the implicit understanding that a teacher uses to inform their decision-making about how to teach that are invisible to the novice observer (Pylman, 2018).

Considering the needs of the learners

Both student-teachers from each dyad shared similar accounts about how co-planning with their mentor meant that they went about planning in a different way from how they usually approached planning.

'she [the teacher mentor] says 'first, you've got to think what you want them to learn at the end of the lesson. And then you have to start your planning'…. Previously I would maybe have included something that was absolutely not relevant. I would be just thinking of, you know, 'I've got to start at this point and 15 minutes later, I should be ending at that point.'

Nadia (student-teacher, dyad A)

'She [the teacher mentor] was like, 'Okay, what is the overall learning outcome, what do you want them to learn?' Whereas before I would just get the PowerPoint out and then just put some activities in there.'

Danni (student teacher, dyad B)

The student-teachers described a shift in their thinking from being largely concerned with what they, as the teachers, were delivering toward being more concerned with what the pupils in the room were actually learning. This represents a shift akin to moving from Twisleton's (2018) 'task manager' mindset found amongst student teachers, to what she called the 'knowledge and skill builder' mindset. Both of the student-teachers talked in terms of previously having viewed teaching as a matter of just getting through the content. Danni speaks of how she used to feel guilty that she had not 'finished it all' in terms of getting through everything she had intended in her plan. Similarly, Nadia spoke on more than one occasions about feeling a pressure to get through the content possibly at the expense of considering whether it had been learnt - just so that she could 'keep up' with the other teachers in the department.

Both student-teachers reflected on the fact that co-planning had embedded a new way of thinking about lesson planning. Indeed, Ubaque-Casallas (2020) suggests that because of the fundamental thought process involved, the process of planning a lesson can be regarded as a significant analytical tool for beginning teachers to unpack their own thinking about teaching and learning. Danni concluded her interview by saying:

> *'The main thing I've learned is to structure my thoughts, just to ask myself specific questions and to plan according to what I want to assess or what I want them to learn at the end.'*

And similarly, Nadia stated that:

> *'[co-planning] has made me reach a point where now, independently I can think yes, these were the things I can include these other things I definitely I don't want to.'*

Thus, the student-teachers are explaining that they can take their learning from co-planning and apply it to when they plan on their own. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) work on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and his suggestion that what someone can do today in cooperation with an expert they can do tomorrow alone because the novice gradually internalises new ways of thinking (Feinman-Nemsar and Beasley, 2005). As such there is the suggestion here that co-planning leads to long-term and transferable learning on behalf of the student-teacher.

Confidence leading to creativity

Interestingly, despite being just 9 months into their teaching careers, both the student-teachers felt they had become stuck in a rut in how they taught their lessons; a finding echoed by Mutton et al. (2011). They felt they were relying too often on a handful of strategies that worked for them and as such had become overly reliant on these and now lacked the confidence to risk trying anything different. Potentially, the increased amount of teaching and associated increase in workload in the final phase of training had led the trainees to stick with approaches they could plan quickly and were comfortable with. Their willingness to try new things had been somewhat eroded by the pressure of workload. However, the co-planning sessions seem to have helped address this issue as both the student-teachers mentioned on several occasions how they felt planning alongside their mentor gave them the confidence to try doing something differently. Perhaps the best example of this is where Nadia recounted an example of how her mentor, had given her the confidence to go back and re-teach a concept.

> *'I came back and told Carys "Carys, I think the students have no clue what they are doing" and at that time we had already used two lessons and the other two teachers were far ahead. That's when she told me, "if you are thinking that those resources have not been any use, stop it there, create a new one for both the classes, go back again and do it for them." So, with that input I created a completely new resource because she's the one who supported me. I could have left it; I would have thought "all right let's leave it" because we have to catch up'.*

Nadia was adamant that without support from her mentor she would not have gone back and re-taught the concept her class was struggling with; we could argue she would have remained in Twiselton's (2018) 'curriculum deliverer' mindset and only concerned herself with keeping up with the other teachers. Instead, Nadia has been shown that the pupils' learning takes priority over curriculum coverage and that a teacher's agency is paramount. Nadia went on to conclude with a neat summary of her co-planning experience when she said:

> *'This mentoring in a positive way definitely increases your confidence as a new teacher, otherwise you're just left on your own to, you know, experiment.'*

This mirrors thoughts shared by both Clara and Danni who spoke of the confidence that can be gained when you have someone with you during planning with whom to share ideas. For Danni, she explained that through co-planning she had the confidence to just focus on one skill when planning a lesson and therefore reduce the amount of content. Again, highlighting that co-planning allowed her to understand to prioritise pupil learning over curriculum coverage. She explained that she now

planned lessons with far fewer PowerPoint slides as she had the confidence to use the slides as a guide rather than a script.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the idea that the act of planning is the opportunity to anticipate what might happen (Mutton et al. 2011) and this is very difficult for a novice teacher to do as vital information is hidden from them (Schwille, 2008). What the pupils already know, how they may respond and what they might find difficult are some of the key pieces of information that a teacher needs to know to plan a successful lesson and yet it is all invisible to the beginning teacher. All this information is part of what Shulman (1986) referred to as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and this research suggests that co-planning is an effective vehicle for communicating PCK to student-teachers.

It could be argued that a student-teacher may not understand the rationale for the PCK the mentor is sharing. Indeed Mutton et al. (2011) suggest co-planning may be seen by some as merely 'spoon-feeding' information on how to teach without student-teachers working it out for themselves and thus they lose the opportunity to learn from their own experiences. I would disagree with this on two grounds; firstly, this argument is suggesting that co-planning is nothing more than a mentor telling a student-teacher how a lesson should be taught. This is to misunderstand educative mentoring which involves the mentor genuinely collaborating on the planning task, asking questions to probe deep reflection (Pylman, 2018) and having specific learning goals in mind for the trainee. Secondly, allowing student-teachers to make mistakes that could have been avoided is a waste of time and is arguably not fair on the pupils to whom the lesson is taught. Even with co-planning, student-teachers will make errors in their teaching, but co-planning is a far more efficient method for teaching beginning teachers crucial PCK and thus give them the best chance of making clear and sustained progress in their practice.

Given the short length of the case study, it is perhaps surprising how positive all the participants were about co-planning and the significant impact the student-teachers felt it had on their approach to lesson planning. Despite having only trialled co-planning three times over a month, both student-teachers explained that the experience had caused them to think differently. The student-teachers stated that they now planned lessons by focussing on what the intended learning goals were and how to best enable the pupils to achieve these, rather than simply being concerned with getting through the content. The co-planning experience had led student-teachers to internalise a new way of thinking, something that they felt they could transfer to all their lesson planning.

A further benefit of co-planning that emerged and is largely absent from the literature is that co-planning appears to encourage greater confidence in the student-teacher and a willingness to try a wider range of approaches in their teaching. Rather than sitting alone, wondering whether a strategy may or may not work and ultimately deciding to not risk it, through co-planning student-teachers receive immediate expert feedback on any ideas they have for their lessons and thus gain confidence in their own thinking and feel empowered to try new teaching strategies.

Due to ongoing pressures from excessive workload, many schools use, and even purchase, centrally planned lessons. Indeed, the government's own report into eliminating unnecessary teacher workload recommended that teachers should 'consider the use of externally produced and quality assured resources' (DfE, 2016, p.12). My concern is that tackling workload should not be 'fixed' by removing lesson planning from the teacher's role. If centrally planned lessons come to dominate our schools, we risk implementing a 'one size fits all' approach to teaching that ignores the context of the pupils and de-skills the teaching profession. In this scenario teachers risk becoming technicians who have lost their criticality and agency and thus find themselves unable to break away from the 'dead hand of deliverology' (Lambert & Hopkin, 2014, p.75).

This research suggests that co-planning should be considered as a key part of teacher education pedagogy as it is effective at enabling the mentor to share their tacit knowledge of how to teach. As such, careful consideration needs to be given to mentor training as mentors must be clear on how to guide the learning process during co-planning meetings. This research also highlights the importance of the relationship between an initial teacher education provider and their partnership schools. Teaching beginning teachers how to plan is not solely down to one party or the other, the provider can deliver the theory, explain the rationale and present alternatives while the school is able to demonstrate how context influences a teacher's lesson design decisions. What is perhaps needed next is the development of a conceptual framework to show how knowledge and skill building in teacher education is shared between initial teacher education partners and thus building a shared vision of effective lesson planning. It is clear that lesson planning is a very complex skill, but it is one that that can be taught using co-planning.

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