"Taking the most delicate care": Beginnings of a Mentoring Relationship between Teachers and Coaches in an Australian School

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Abstract

We explore the beginnings of professional coaching/mentoring relationships between teachers and university mentors in an Australian school. Often overlooked, initial steps are crucial, holding the seeds of eventual success or failure. Our mentoring program was undertaken in a large, independent, co-educational school in suburban Melbourne, Victoria. In our constructivist study, underpinned by our desire to explore on the lived experiences of others, we report on the understandings of three of the mentors/ researchers and the teachers that they worked with. We gathered data from teacher-written statements and mentor journals. Using thematic analysis, we developed our findings, performing epoché as we hold both insider and outsider mentor/researcher perspectives. We present our findings under two broad headings: The prior understandings held by all and addresses positions, assertions and anticipations; and First meetings, finding accords, noticing resistances, and recognizing difficulties. We found that the apparent simplicity of first steps masked great complexity. No one entered the first meeting as an "empty vessel." Some relationships were more problematic than others. Our goals as transformational educator/ mentors were to foster deep collaborative, professional relationships with our mentees but were hampered by inherent differences of understanding with the school who sought transactional coaches. Clarity in intent from the outset is crucial to program success.

Keywords

Mentoring Teachers, Coaching Teachers, Collaborative Professional Relationships, Beginning Mentoring, Accords and Resistances, Thematic Analysis

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We explore the beginnings of professional coaching/mentoring relationships between teachers and university mentors in an Australian school. Often overlooked, initial steps are crucial, holding the seeds of eventual success or failure. Our mentoring program was undertaken in a large, independent, co-educational school in suburban Melbourne, Victoria. In our constructivist study, underpinned by our desire to explore on the lived experiences of others, we report on the understandings of three of the mentors/researchers and the teachers that they worked with. We gathered data from teacher-written statements and mentor journals. Using thematic analysis, we developed our findings, performing epoché as we hold both insider and outsider mentor/researcher perspectives. We present our findings under two broad headings: The prior understandings held by all and addresses positions, assertions and anticipations; and First meetings, finding accords, noticing resistances, and recognizing difficulties. We found that the apparent simplicity of first steps masked great complexity. No one entered the first meeting as an "empty vessel." Some relationships were more problematic than others. Our goals as transformational educator/mentors were to foster deep collaborative, professional relationships with our mentees but were hampered by inherent differences of understanding with the school who sought transactional coaches. Clarity in intent from the outset is crucial to program success. Keywords: Mentoring Teachers, Coaching Teachers, Collaborative Professional Relationships, Beginning Mentoring, Accords and Resistances, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

As Frank Herbert stated in the beginning of his epic novel *Dune* "A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct" (Herbert, 1984, p. 1). The beginning of professional coaching relationships requires the delicacy of first meetings, first glimpses of the other, first steps in a dyadic dance that shapes all that will follow. Relationships begin with hopes, expectations, assumptions, suspicions, fears, pressures, and tensions for both participants. This research considers the first steps that are crucial to any relationships and that may hold the seeds of eventual success or failure, specifically the first moments in a professional mentoring program for teachers. We explore the first moments in the relationships between mentor and mentee which encompasses hopes, expectations, excitements, pressures, reservations, and suspicions on both sides. Discussions of mentoring programs often gloss over the initial formative moments and most report on successful programs in which nothing went awry. For example, Foy and Keane (2017) simply state that mentees were "introduced to their mentors and encouraged to mingle for one hour" (p. 5). Ideally, relationships between mentor and mentee seek to improve "role understanding, successful role transition, and completion of

goals and objectives" (Barrett, Mazerolle & Nottingham, 2017, p. 152), however such potential outcomes must begin with first impressions. While evidence for the cliché "first impressions stick forever" is mixed, these whole impressions of a person may be difficult to modify, especially without conscious re-evaluation (Holtz 2015; Mann & Ferguson, 2015). Making a positive first impression is important.

We report on only one facet of a pilot personalized professional coaching program, developed and implemented to specification for a large, kindergarten to Year 12, independent, co-educational school in suburban Melbourne. Other facets of the year-long program are explored elsewhere (Rutherford et al., 2018). This program was conceived as a coaching program that was short term, task oriented with finite goals and boundaries. Coaching uses the same approaches, understandings, and skills as mentoring, but the difference is one of duration. Mentoring relationships are intended to last longer and are a "complex phenomenon that affects the personal and professional lives of both mentor and mentee" (Sambunjak, Straus, & Marusic, 2009, p. 77). Although of limited duration, as educators, it seemed that we continued to hold the idea that we were mentors and not coaches. To us, coaches were transactional, and we wanted to engender transformational change. With hindsight, it is possible to think that we were a little arrogant in assuming that we knew best. We chose (possibly mistakenly) to understand this coaching program as an opportunity for mentoring and we use this term is used to discuss the experiences of the mentors and mentees. There was tension surrounding the use of the terms "coach" and "mentor" which we return to later in this article. The commissioning school specified the term "coach," but the "coaches" were uncomfortable with this managerial connotation and preferred to think of themselves as "mentors." This tension between the terms reflected the basic misunderstanding between what the school envisaged and what it was that we would do. To us, the use of the term "coach" implied a transactional model of engagement in which we would work with compliant teachers, whereas we continued to refer to ourselves as "mentors" who were working towards transforming thinking and practice (Capobianco & Feldman, 2010; Goodnough, 2010; Leithwood, 1992; Pine, 2009). This dissonance underpinned interactions throughout the program but were never resolved. Mentors adopt a range of roles such as collaborator, coach, advocate, advisor, and learning facilitator (Fowler, 2017). Further, mentors should help mentees flourish "by offering them emotional and moral support, working to build their personal and professional abilities" (Sambunjak, Straus, & Marusic, 2009, p. 76). Respected mentors "form relationships rooted in integrity, trust and support" (Johnson, 2016, p. 62) and are empathetic, supportive, approachable and non-judgmental (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Mentors should possess all of these traits and have strategies to facilitate relationships available from the outset. Particularly important is the emotional competence of the mentor who should possess the "capacity for emotional awareness and sensitivity, appropriate management of feelings emerging in a relationship, and the capacity for self-care and personal balance" (Johnson, 2016, p. 64).

Successful mentoring relationships must include "shared values and personalities, a symbiotic mindset, motivation, and openness to the relationship" (Barrett et al., 2017, p. 152). To achieve this, clear communications are required from the outset so that the mentor and mentee can find their shared understandings, experiences, and attitudes (Barrett et al., 2017). Mentees need to be "ready" to be mentored which begins with an openness to the engagement, a "willingness to learn and change, and preparedness to operate outside of their comfort zone" (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012, p. 61). Corollary to this central condition are contextual support and appropriate pairing of mentor and mentee but these are not the focus of this discussion. Although limited, prior research identifies the importance of openness and willingness at the outset of a mentoring relationship (Hobson et al., 2009). This willing position is often beyond the control of the mentors and if not present, the relationships are doomed before they begin. Using the metaphor of dance, Aguilar (2013) outlines the three steps endlessly repeated in the

mentoring relationship—listen, respond, and engage in activity. The first step taken by a mentor (or coach) is to listen which is a complex skill involving all the traits of a good mentor, particularly empathy, openness and a suspension of judgement (Olsson, Cruickshank, & Collins, 2017). An effective mentor must have very good listening skills (Hobson et al., 2009) and be ready to follow the lead of the mentee. The point is well made but overlooks that which mentors brings to the dance, rather ascribing the role of tabula rasa, the blank slate that carriers no prior assumptions.

Initially the commissioning school received expressions of interest to participate from 40 teachers but not all were selected by the school administration for the program. We were not involved in the selection process and only later came to understand what was behind some of the decisions. Over the course of 2017, 23 teacher participants from across the primary and secondary school worked one-on-one with one of seven university academic coaches/mentors, actively participating in four pre-brief/teach/reflect cyclical interactions. Each iteration was intended to gradually support teacher participants as they progressed towards becoming action researchers (Rutherford et al., 2018). Of the initial cohort, 21 teacher participants completed the program. Each mentor was assigned between two and six teachers to work with. All university-based mentors also held current teacher accreditation and possessed years of teaching experience in both primary and secondary schools, providing credibility and the promise of pragmatic and empathetic understanding of the realities of teacher practice. Teacher data sources included: an initial online application to participate that included a statement about their aspirations and expectations; pre- and post-intervention online surveys; and four professional learning journal entries (that became shorter and shorter as the year progressed). We were not given permission by the school to interview the teachers at the end of the program. Mentor data sources included audio-recordings of regular coaching team meetings and professional learning journal entries. This research began with the question, how did mentors and teachers begin the first steps of the dance of engagement?

Methodology

This constructivist study explored the lived experiences of the teachers and mentors and is underpinned by a phenomenological stance in which researchers recognise that "truth" is relative and depends on the perspective of the individual (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Patton, 2002). Adopting this stance, researchers consider reality to be socially constructed and reliant on experiences, beliefs and understandings (Creswell, 2014; Searle, 1995). Phenomenologists seek to understand the first meanings and held understandings of experienced phenomena, attempt to suspend researcher assumptions and biases and undertake data collection and analysis before the application of theoretical constructs (Mohammadi, Shekari, Banar & Ajili, 2014). Three of the authors (Karen Marangio, Maria Gindidis and Donna Rady) were mentors in the program. The first author (Jane Southcott) is a colleague who was invited to join the program to assist with ethical processes and collaborative research. As researchers adopting a phenomenological approach, we are aware of the need to position ourselves both as insiders and outsiders. By performing epoché or "bracketing" we attempted to suspend and interrogate our own experiences so that we were very attentive to the ways in which we brought understandings to our own engagements and that of the teacher participants (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). We acknowledge that as authors, we have been able to interrogate our experiences as mentors in a way not available to our teacher participants. We have used all the data available to us to include the teacher participants' voices.

With ethical approval, data for this research into one aspect of the program were garnered from two sources. The participants were 23 teacher mentee respondents who wrote about their aspirations for the program in their applications for inclusion and three of the seven

mentors who are co-authors of this paper (our colleagues have chosen to write in small teams on different aspects of this program). The teacher statements were written as part of their application to be included in the school. They answered one broad question, why do you want to be in this program? We recognize that all these aspirational statements were written by the teachers with the knowledge that the school authorities were judging their statements, thus we have been judicious in selecting quotes that give a sense of the people that the mentors came to know. The mentees have been given pseudonyms and all identifying details have been removed or masked as initial applications were promised confidentiality. We refer to the mentors who are also authors of this paper as Karen, Donna, and Maria. The first author was not a mentor. The mentors wrote about their recollections of the first moments of the coaching relationship in their reflective journals. The texts in the applications and the journal entries were read and re-read independently by all authors. In marginal notes we each recorded keywords and phrases. We then met and discussed our initial codings, then combined emergent themes into related concepts and built integrated and explanatory representations of our understandings (Mawson, Berry, Murray, & Hayward, 2011). We were not given permission to contact our teacher participants to confirm our interpretations by the school at the end of the program. The findings were written up under headings that emerged from our data which are reported thematically. To give voice to the participants, their words are quoted verbatim. The statements by the mentees were comparatively short, those of the mentors were longer. Our data could be deemed "anecdotal stories" but such data involve the reader in deepening ways, first recruiting attention, then involving the reader on a personal level and engendering reflection, offering the possibility of transformation; all of which deepen interpretation and responsiveness (van Manen, 2016). This research process replicates the experience of the mentors and mentees who are the participants in this study. Bracketing assumptions in the research process echoes the bracketing required of mentors in the first stages of a coaching relationship. Thus, the mentors explored the lived experiences of themselves and the participants, then the authors (who were also the mentors) interpreted their shared understandings. The cyclical and iterative process is implicit in research that explores lived experience (Creely & Southcott, in press).

Findings

We present our findings gleaned from all our data sources, under two broad headings: Before the program: Teachers' Positions, Assertions and Anticipation; and The first meeting: Finding accords, noticing resistances and recognizing difficulties. To preface our discussion, we note that the mentees included teachers from across the school, some of whom were in leadership roles. There appeared to be different reasons behind people's desire to be part of the program which complicated the relationships between mentees and mentors. Some participants seemed genuinely excited about the possibility of personal growth, but others appeared to be in the program because they thought (or were told) that they ought to be. This was evident in one applicant's application to take part in the program, whose reasons to take part were, "To evaluate whether such a program adds value to teaching practice; to determine whether the program is worth pursuing for the school." As we have stated, it was the school who decided who was in the program, not us.

Before the program: Teachers' Positions, Assertions and Anticipation

To be part of this program, potential participants were required to apply and explain their reasons for wishing to take part. These statements were written with the knowledge that the school administration would see them and choose who would be included. Further, it was

known that the applications of those 23 selected from the wider field would be read by the mentors as they allocated participants to mentors. This quasi-public statement was crafted by applicants with the expectation of evaluation. We felt that although the statements were written for consumption by members of the school hierarchy, there was honesty in most of the statements. As we read these statements, we identified positions, positioning, and anticipation. Some began by explaining themselves and their expertise. For example, one stated,

> Having a number of years teaching experience in primary and tertiary education and several post-graduate qualifications in the field but finding a particular passion for teaching early years students, I would now like to improve and refine my early years understandings and skills to ensure best practice.

The participants fell into two broad groups; those who focused on their teaching and those who wanted to develop their leadership skills. A few wanted both and some were quite general about wanting to "challenge myself to be better at my profession." Participants wrote that they wanted to learn and hone their leadership skills. One made it very clear who they were and how they wanted to be understood, beginning his sentence with "Being a leading teacher within the school, …." Several mentioned wanting to develop their leadership skills so they could support colleagues and share their expertise and passion for teaching with others. One mentioned hoping to

> focus and improve [their] ability to assist in making a team that works effectively and efficiently. To be guided to deal and effectively channel team players who may be resistant, reluctant and reticent. Conversely, to maximise on the team players who are dynamic team members.

The other group spoke primarily about themselves as teachers. One participant began enthusiastically with "I love teaching and I love learning" and relished the "opportunity to learn and develop skills, knowledge and understanding relevant to my craft … opportunities to continue to reflect on the way that I teach and help me to improve and grow as a teacher and also a colleague." One described being time poor and hoped that the program would force them to find the time to reflect on their practice. Others sought feedback on their teaching, fresh ideas, furthering knowledge and abilities, and the opportunity to work with someone from outside the school community. It was envisaged that this new skill and understanding would benefit their students, colleagues and themselves. Participants sought particular benefits for their students—autonomous learning, self-regulated learning, enhanced motivation, and improved engagement and outcomes. It was hoped that the program would be a refresher to take established skills to the next level, and one realistically stated that "I realise that there are areas of my teaching that could improve and I wish to pursue improving them." Most showed some form of hope for improvement and to become "the best I can be." A couple just wanted new strategies to implement immediately in their classrooms—seeking "tricks and tips" without the implicit self-work inherent in a mentoring relationship.

Concerning their anticipated relationship with their mentor, mentees aspirations mostly spoke about finding a "more knowledgeable other" who would assist them with "a professional conversation," "constructive feedback," and "guidance." Some saw the potential relationship as more like a conversation between peers which involved "open and honest dialogue." A few went further, hoping to be challenged and develop the ability to critically self-analyse. One risk taker hoped to "make some mistakes so that I can learn from them." Given this diversity of motivations and expectations, it was only to be expected that some mentee/mentor relationships

would be more successful than others. One participant summed up their thoughts at the beginning of the program,

> My first experience with the coaching program was one of great anticipation, while simultaneously not knowing what was actually in store for me. While I had read quite a bit about the program and my coach, nothing could have prepared me for the feeling I had when I left after our first hour session.

These different positions encompassed very different teacher understandings. Although we had read these statements, we did not necessarily consider them to include everything that the teacher might have wanted to say. We recognized that these statements were written with the knowledge of organizational oversight and so the mentors retained an open attitude at the initial meeting, waiting to see who would appear before them.

The first meeting

The mentors wrote about their first encounters with their participants which underlined the diversity of the mentee cohort. Some first meetings were positive with shared understandings quickly recognised, others were more tense, with defences raised before the first words were uttered. Mentors too had concerns going into the process. Following a discussion of what the mentees brought to the first meeting, the findings of the mentors are reported under two broad headings: Finding accords and Noticing resistances and recognising difficulties.

Donna described her first meeting with one of her mentees:

> As I sat down on the little chair, at the little table, in the Early Years classroom, at 7:30am, I began my first step into the world of professional coaching with a well-rehearsed, "so Ashleigh, tell me more about your learning interests and why you chose these." This gave me some breathing and head-space to allow me to calm my own nerves, settle into the role and start exploring what brought Ashleigh to this program. I listened attentively and took notes. I was warm, friendly, smiled encouragingly and presented further questions, at opportune moments, to develop my understanding of Ashleigh's needs for professional learning whilst all the time trying to be what I saw as the professional coach!

Donna adopted a confident, professional persona despite having some uncertainty about what would unfold. Karen too was a little nervous before the first meeting and hoped that she would "connect with her teachers and have something to offer." Maria is a very experienced mentor and approached the meetings with confidence and positivity.

The first meetings began in different ways, largely depending on the expectations of the teachers. The mentors began by trying to find out more and to know what kind of teacher and person they were to be working with. For some, this was finding shared commonalities, for others it was about establishing positions and agendas.

Finding accords

Karen described finding accords with one of her mentees: "We had lots to talk about and I look forward to working with her in this role. She was very excited to meet me, and very excited about the personalized coaching program." A point of confluence was found when the mentee mentioned studying at a particular university and Karen shared that she "taught in that

course in that particular year." At that point, her mentee Imogen "immediately relaxed and was even more excited that I knew about her education background." The mentee shared about her learning and teaching experiences and offered that she has an "ongoing need to challenge and develop myself as a teacher." The mentee envisaged working with her mentor "in a partnership, with a shared goal to enhance her teaching." Karen found this exciting as she had encountered "someone open to new ideas and accepting that the program will challenge us at times and wants to work as a collaborative team." Karen observed from their first meeting that Imogen was "friendly, respected by other teachers, hard-working, a team player," an "ideas' person—a creative thinker" but she had

> a question mark around her level of confidence in her own ability. While she seemed to be on top of things, she also seemed to doubt herself – as a teacher and in her leadership roles, and perhaps my role will be helping her back herself, run with and test her ideas and reassure her.

Karen suspected that, despite her apparent competence and nearly two decades of teaching experience, Imogen has some underlying insecurity about her levels of expertise.

Donna met Laura in the café within the school and was struck that this was quite an informal setting in which to begin a professional relationship. The space was open, noisy, full of students and other teachers also meeting with their coach/mentor. Donna mused that perhaps this was "the perfect environment to relax Laura who appeared more nervous than me!" As they began to talk, Donna realised that Laura "loved teaching and was passionate about her subject area." Donna also noticed that Laura was self-critical and focussed on her perceived weaknesses. Donna wrote that,

> I had an immediately sense that I needed to nurture her and that this would be a relationship based more on support and would require trust. Drawing on a positive viewpoint, I left Laura with a key message "be kind to yourself."

Maria too found an established connection with Margaret, one of her three mentees who had attended Maria's lectures at the university. Although Maria did not remember Margaret, she remembered Maria and "right from the beginning she [Margaret] was very, very positive, and I felt as if I was on some pedestal." Maria found Margaret to be the most nervous of her mentees who at the commencement of their mentoring relationship reverted to her previous role, that of pre-service student in need of assurance and guidance. Another mentee, Catherine had attended a professional development seminar that Maria had presented and was already excited to be working with Maria. The third mentee, Patricia had been a university academic and with whom Maria established a collegial bond from the outset based on their shared educational background. Maria found accords with all her mentees based on their prior attendance in her lectures or seminars, or as a fellow teacher educator.

Some first meetings contained both consonance and a touch of dissonance. Donna reflected that she was not sure if her,

> first meeting with Elizabeth was an easy coaching conversation or a more difficult one. On the one-hand, it was easy because Elizabeth was in a similar leadership role to one that I had been in previously, so I felt that there was an instant connection, understanding and empathy of where she was coming from, particularly in terms of her leadership tensions. On the other hand, it was difficult because I didn't want to fall into relating my own personal stories. I wanted to focus on listening to Elizabeth's stories. However, the nature of

conversations is a curious thing and a two-way process where you share experiences. It is easy to fall into a comfortable default position of relaxed, informal conversations with colleagues compared to the professional coaching relationship I was trying to establish.

Maria felt a bit of trepidation around working with Catherine, the head of curriculum who was clearly a very experienced senior teacher in the school. Maria understood that Catherine was in a position where she felt vulnerable because all the other staff would be able to see her being coached. Maria felt that this could send two different messages to the other staff, either that Catherine was part of the team engaged in this program who believed in the notion of coaching, or that Catherine needed to be in the program because she was not very good at teaching. It was not certain to either Maria or Catherine, what the interpretation of other staff would be. This added another note to the tension that underpinned the relationship from the outset.

Finding accords gave mentors and mentees a sense of comfort and shared camaraderie that had the potential to support the development of the relationship. It could also be misleading, in that finding an assumed accord could belie underpinning but unarticulated differences. Both Donna and Karen found initial accords with some of their mentees which later turned out to be unsupportable to all parties but that is beyond the focus of this article.

Noticing resistances and recognising difficulties

Karen found Jennifer "maybe too confident on the first day" which might have been the result of nervousness or possibly something more. Jennifer began by stating that she was excited to be "working with someone with my expertise and coming from the same subject area." Immediately, Jennifer explained how successful her senior years teaching was and that she was about to run a workshop at a teacher conference. Jennifer thus asserted her expertise and standing before the relationship had begun. Some of this may have been bravado as Jennifer is young but has assumed a leadership role in the school. Karen understood that Jennifer "felt a strong need to "prove" herself as a leader" although it was never actually stated. Karen was not sure that Jennifer was open to new ideas and the possibility of critique but held back from deciding that this was the case. Jennifer talked more about teaching in general than about herself and Karen wished she had longer to explore Jennifer's ideas in more depth. Karen felt that Jennifer was not relaxed or open, but that this was might be understandable at a first conversation. Karen tried to push more about exploring goals but Jennifer "closed down" and seemed to want Karen to just give her simple answers and suggestions. These initial resistances meant that Karen had misgivings about whether Jennifer would be able to own her engagement with the program. Karen decided that in this relationship, she would have to be careful navigating conversations. At the end of the first meeting, Karen left,

> not quite sure if Jennifer wanted me in her classroom, or if she had the time to be in this program, or if she was just doing this because she felt obliged to do so, although she was pleasant throughout my visit.

Donna had carefully prepared questions for her first meeting with Helen that she felt would

> prompt thinking and elicit rich conversations about professional learning and the direction Helen wanted to in. But I was quickly reminded that people are often fragile and unpredictable beings, and sometimes a timely question is just enough to evoke a powerful emotional response. I could see the emotions building in Helen to the point where they just bubbled over as I frantically

searched my bag for tissues in anticipation of what was coming—tears! Right in the middle of school café! I felt that the reaction caught her as much by surprise as it did me. She hadn't realised the effect of some tensions she was harbouring. Clearly, this was something for us to both explore further and it was obvious that our journey had begun.

The first meeting was a time of positioning and noticing for all parties in the relationships. Some appeared to begin easily, possibly too easily as it later unfolded; others were more difficult but later flourished. The first meeting could set the tenor of what would follow or strike a discordant note that would either resolve or amplify.

Discussion

The university-based mentors in the project collected observational data both intentionally in journals and unintentionally across the year. As a group of educators, the mentors met regularly to talk about what was happening in their dyads, sharing anecdotes, opinions and feelings, and through this we were developing shared understandings. We understand our practice now, as resonating with the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014). This allowed for interrogation of practices of the school as a social site, rather than the individuals or practitioners within a practice. The framework takes its inspiration from a site-ontological practice perspective (Schatzki, 2002), which posits that organisations such as schools are inherently social phenomena composed of practices which unfold in all their "happeningness" (Schatzki, 2005). As mentors, we were invested in this element of transformative practice. Other elements included our focus on the intersections between teachers' and mentors' worlds, the intention to be cooperative and open to negotiation, seeking adaptation to new understandings, mutual benefice, giving "voice" to all parties, and professional growth (Pine, 2009). We observe that in a few cases, this intention was not reflective of the actual intentions that our mentees or the school that had commissioned our program—we later realized that our practices and behaviors were being observed and judged by several people who may have been put into the project to surveil. But this was beyond our understanding in the first meetings. We also did not understand at the outset, the degree of control the school wanted over the program. We admit we were naïve and, as we said earlier, possibly a bit arrogant, confident on our understanding that we knew best.

From the beginning of our intersections and engagements, neither mentees nor mentors entered the program as empty vessels and what was brought encompassed a very broad range of experience, understanding, and attitude. The mentees selected by the school included teachers with very varying degrees of experience. The participants fell largely into two groups; those who focused on their teaching and those who wanted to develop their leadership skills. Participants brought a range of attitudes to their first meeting—ranging from open and willing to sceptical bordering on hostile. Even before the process began, it was clear that some relationships would be harder than others. The first steps of the dance were individualised and varied. Mentors were not always fully prepared for what they encountered. With hindsight, a more homogeneous group might have been more effective but to achieve that, we needed a voice in the mentee selection process, something the school did not intend.

As an inherently social and relational practice, mentoring cannot be fully understood without attention to how it unfolds and takes shape as a practice in particular sites at particular times (Kemmis et al., 2014). As such, a practice architecture lens shifts the researchers' gaze from the work of individual or groups of practitioners to the mentoring practices in a given site in which mentors and mentees are always located. This was apparent in this project after data revealed that the school site valued transactional compliant participation of teacher

participants, whilst the values documented by mentors were in essence transformational (Leithwood, 1992). Our goals as transformational educators were to foster deep collaborative, professional relationships with our mentees. This did not always occur due to the inherent perception divide between transactional coach and transformative mentor. We began with optimism which may have been naive. We entered the collaborative space without fully grasping the preconditions that shaped both our first engagements and our ongoing behaviours. With hindsight, we should have looked at the site through an architectural practice lens and if we do this again, we will.

Architectures of practice is a theoretical resource for understanding teacher professional practice; an analytical resource for revealing the ways practices are enabled and constrained by the conditions under which they occur; and a transformational resource for finding ways to change the professional practice of teachers. Ultimately, some of our conversations were built on a basic misunderstanding that coloured the first meeting and sometimes made relationships difficult. Some of our work was based on the false premise of accord. As mentors, we did not fully understand the school's intentions (transactional) and we worked on our own assumptions (transformative). The school wanted the teachers to do what they already did but better and we wanted to change people to become better teachers per se. We wanted the mentors to become the drivers of their own professional learning, researchers of their own classroom and practice. As mentors, we wanted to be attentive to their individual needs. It appeared to us that the school was not seeking this—they were seeking "add ons" to their current practice. We hoped for reform, the school authorities wanted compliance and greater efficiencies. Some of our dances were a complete mismatch—one person followed the steps of a waltz while their partner tried a foxtrot.

The mentors were outwardly professional and friendly but for some this covered a degree of nervousness and uncertainty. Having several mentees meant that mentors had to "think on their feet" in the first moments of each relationship and this dance varied from one individual to the next. In the first moments, mentors found mentees who asserted their expertise, announced their resistances, shared life experiences, and one who just started to cry, her tears welling up as she spoke. For this mentee, her degree of emotional engagement in her work and the tensions between what was expected of her and what she valued in teaching and learning was an unresolved and previously unconsidered matter. This degree of investment was a surprise to her, and this set the direction of her future journey with her empathetic mentor. Trust had been created in an instant. Depending on the degree of openness and willingness, the dance took on different forms. Tentative steps became a synchronized *pas de deux*[1] or an *apache*[2] of confrontation.

The first steps in the mentoring relationship shaped what was to follow. Exploring these first moments offered insights that can inform the design and efficacy of coaching programs and mentoring relationships. The first insight is that the mentors needed to cover the full gamut of possibilities. Our mentees were nervous, keen to find connections, occasionally resistant, sometimes judgmental, but mostly open to change. Being part of the program was for some a brave decision which they felt could open them up to scrutiny and judgement from their peers. Mentors needed to be alert to small signals—body language, facial expressions, and verbal gestures—that could hold large importance. The first steps were vital and shaped all that would follow. A cue missed was a missed opportunity and a possible misstep in the dance that was to follow. We ultimately realised that we were not just dancing with one person, but behind them was a whole school ethos and culture—we were dancing with a person framed by a ghostly chorus.

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[1] The *pas de deux* is a ballet dance duet in which (most commonly) a man and a woman dance in synchrony.
[2] *La Danse Apache* or Tough Dance enacts a violent disagreement between a man and a woman and evolved in the Parisian underworld of the early 20th century.

Limitations

This is a small-scale study that has allowed us to dive deep into the data and its interpretation. We offer anecdotal data by including the voices of our mentees gleaned from their data and the experiences of our mentors. It is common in qualitative research to use anecdotal data or stories which compel attention, involve the reader, transform the receiver, challenge understanding and ultimately enforce change. The inclusion of effective anecdotal narratives underscores tensions and drives reflection (van Manen, 2016). The selection of mentees should result in a homogeneous group. Having a group with very different aspirations and attitudes makes a successful mentoring program more difficult. By "homogenous," we suggest that all mentees should be entering freely into the process with an open readiness to reflect and change. Our cohort included such people but also several who were directed to be involved as a disciplinary measure, one who wanted to watch what we were doing and another who only volunteered as a step towards promotion. Our problem was that we did not have the right of selection of who would be our dance partners. In a future program, we might ask to interview all participants, rather than accept their aspirational statements written for the school authorities.

Conclusion

Mentors need to be alert to the initial feints in a relationship. They need to be to be flexible, skilled and empathic, mindful that this is a shared endeavour and from the outset, we work together to co-construct a relationship. Preceding the first step should be a careful evaluation of the individual needs and expertise of both mentor and mentee. In our project, there were assumptions and misapprehensions. We also think that our mentor credibility was damaged by mismatching of disciplines and levels of education. The first meeting involved trying to find out who knew what. Within the constraints of the program, we did try to match but were not always successful. We are already talking about writing another paper which addresses the end of our mentoring in this school. We realise that we were probably naive and possibly egotistical in that we decided what we thought people should have, not that which we had been commissioned to do. In another iteration, we would do our homework, work towards a shared vision for mentoring program by the school and mentors before the first meeting the importance of which should not be downplayed. We see the potential for mentoring relationships to be a fascinating dance that develops strong dynamic relationships and transformative change and that acknowledges that relationships begin with hopes, expectations, assumptions, suspicions, fears, pressures and tensions for both participants.

In the beginning of this article we pointed out the tension that underpinned engagement with teachers in the context of their school. We were employed to be coaches—a short term solution to a perceived problem that (it was believed) we could address by intervention. Unfortunately, we understood ourselves to be mentors who were driven to help mentees flourish. With hindsight, we realise that the school asked us to "train" the teachers, but we (as transformative educators) wanted to develop their capacities and confidences. We realise now, that with this tension and misunderstanding, we were unlikely to be successful. However, we did engender teacher change in some participants and personally, we learnt a lot about working in the field. We also realised just how important our first meetings with our mentees were—they set the steps in motion for all that was to follow.

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