



A Comparative Analysis of two Mentoring Approaches at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore.

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Abstract

Mentoring is significant in the life of any new teacher, and has been shown to increase effectiveness and ensure retention, particularly for educational therapists of special needs. A mentoring programme aims to provide new educational therapists with support in the practical aspect of teaching. At the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS), formal mentoring takes place over a period of six months. New educational therapists are paired with experienced educational therapists who guide them on lesson planning and delivery, as well as classroom and student behaviour management. This study examines the strengths of two types of mentoring approach currently adopted at DAS - (a) mentoring concurrently when formal teaching begins and (b) mentoring after formal teaching begins. The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of two groups of educational therapists who received mentoring from the two approaches. A mixed-method comparative study which involved surveying educational therapists who had completed their mentoring programme using a questionnaire on a five-part Likert scale and face-to-face interviews were adopted. 28 educational therapists in their first two years of teaching were randomly selected for the survey. 6 educational therapists were then purposively selected for an interview to investigate their perceptions on the mentoring approach they had received. These findings will inform of the preferred mentoring approach and help to identify specific challenges, benefits and the impact either of these approaches had on educational therapists' performances. Results revealed that new educational therapists prefer to receive mentoring when their formal teaching begins as they felt more confident and assured when they had a mentor to guide them.

Keywords: mentoring, mentor, mentee, formal teaching, challenges.

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Introduction

There is strong and consistent evidence that mentoring can be a key resource in supporting educational therapists of special needs. A review conducted over several years in the USA has indicated that special educator numbers are falling, with the demands placed on teaching staff leading to attrition, with an associated delay in training adequate replacements for educational therapists who are leaving the field (Muller and Burdette, 2007). Mentoring has proved a significant factor in retaining staff, and helping them to deal effectively with both intervention and behavioural issues, with the policy on mentoring contributing to the quality achieved (Poliekoff et al, 2015).

At the Dyslexia Association of Singapore (DAS), great emphasis is placed on developing and training our educational therapists. DAS is a strong proponent of Continuing Professional Development. As the organisation supports over 3,000 students, there is a need to ensure the remediation that these students receive is not compromised in any way. Students at DAS attend 2 hours of lessons per week. Within this limited time, students must be assured that they are receiving the best possible remediation to help them cope with dyslexia. Hence, every educational therapist must be skilled to address the needs of students.

New educational therapists are put through a rigorous training programme starting with a 2-week lecture and practicum where the new educational therapists are observed twice and thereafter, a six months mentoring

programme where they are partnered with experienced educational therapists who will guide and support them in lesson planning and delivery as well as children behaviour and classroom management. Formal teaching at DAS is defined as new educational therapists teaching their own classes and conducting lessons independently. In addition, mentoring is defined as one-to-one support of a new educational therapist (mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (mentor).

Mentors are assigned to new educational therapists so that they can tap on their mentors' knowledge and experience so as to improve teaching. Besides one-to-one mentoring, "group mentoring", is scheduled fortnightly in the form of 3-hour lectures on topics relevant to teaching such as pedagogy and classroom management. These weekly/fortnightly lectures are different from the earlier 2-week lecture which mentees would have received. In the past five years, there has been two mentoring approaches which are employed at the DAS - mentoring concurrent when teaching begins and mentoring after teaching has begun. The aim of this research was to evaluate which of the two mentoring approaches conducted at the DAS is more helpful to new educational therapists:

- I. New educational therapists start teaching before formal mentoring begins where they are supported by Supervising Educational Therapists (ST) and Cooperating Educational Therapists (CT). Mentoring which is supported by mentors begins after formal teaching has begun

- II. New educational therapists start teaching concurrently with formal mentoring, supported by mentors

The research questions guiding this study are:

- I. What is the perception of educational therapists about the mentoring programme that they underwent?
- II. What are the specific challenges educational therapists faced under both the mentoring approaches?
- III. Which mentoring approach is more effective or should a new mentoring approach be implemented?

It is unknown how many of the organizations which serve the special educational needs services in Singapore provide such intensive training programmes for their new educational therapists to imbue a deep understanding of the population of children they are remediating as well as to inculcate in them a grasp of the curriculum that is developed by the organisation. Hence, it is important to study how the mentoring approaches that have been utilised have benefitted new educational therapists. This study seeks to explore some answers.

Literature review

Mentoring has been increasingly prominent in teacher preparation and widely accepted as the best way to support new educational therapists

professionally after undergoing teacher training (Hall et al, 2008; Hobson et al, 2009; Isreal et al,2014) . New educational therapists generally view mentoring programmes as helpful but they differ in terms of the type of mentoring activities provided and available resources (Huling and Resta, 2007, as cited in Clark & Byrnes, 2012, p.43). The same researchers emphasised Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (1978) which posits that the accumulation of knowledge is not an isolated experience. Vygotsky stated that knowledge is not merely transmitted from one person to another, but rather is socially constructed through interaction with other individuals. Most mentoring programmes constitute support in areas such as classroom management and lesson execution as well as assistance in dealing with parents to adhere to organisational culture and practices.

Daloz stated that "mentoring interventions generally fall along two categories of either support and challenge" (Daloz, 1999 as cited in Certo, 2015, p. 396). Giving support to mentees is a situation where doubts or uncertainties that mentees may have are clarified and replies are readily accepted and they stay in their comfort zone whereas, by contrast, challenge involves a situation of questioning, reflection of differing views and exploration of possibilities between mentors and mentees. Whether the mentoring approach is supporting or challenging in nature, following a mentor's style closely may pose a problem, for this could inhibit a mentee from forming his/her teaching style and creativity amongst other influences may possibly be curbed.

At DAS, new educational therapists go through a mentoring period of six months with two different mentors with each partnership lasting three months. Each mentor may vary in his/her mentoring styles and this will enable mentees to experience a good balance of support and challenge so as to build independence and self-confidence in teaching.

Teacher training

The initial teacher training that every beginning teacher receives in a teaching college involves the learning of pedagogical and theoretical knowledge dispensed by professors who are well versed in teaching pedagogies and theories. However, besides the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge, practical applications of pedagogy in the classroom is fundamental for all educational therapists. A teacher is like the captain of his/her class and in order to perform his/her duty, has to navigate through the ocean of knowledge of the curriculum, lesson planning, students' behaviour and classroom management, fulfilling administrative requirements as well as fitting into an organisation's values and practices.

These tasks can be daunting for any beginning teacher if there is a lack of appropriate support and guidance. This might result in a high teacher turnover as inadequacy in support could lead to new educational therapists feeling unmotivated and eventually leaving the organisation. Mentoring, in this case, has become the 'solution' that connects knowledge with practice where a

beginning educational therapist (mentee) is mentored by an experienced educational therapist (mentor) who will show the new person the ropes in a teaching career and at the same time educate him/her on the organisation's policies. In addition, mentoring is also the key to staff retention where staff who feels adequately supported would continue to serve the organisation.

Mentoring

The objective of any mentoring programme is to improve a mentee's professional growth. Allen and colleagues (2017) asserted that mentoring is necessary in any organisation as it is a critical developmental experience for individuals, and mentoring programmes are often a part of an organisation's career development efforts for its staff - new staff being trained by experienced staff will only enhance the job knowledge for the new staff which is essential for any newcomer (Allen, Chao, Eby and Bauer, 2017). In addition, mentoring is also linked to aspects of socialization at the organisational level as through this, the newcomer will be introduced to more people in the organisation. The three determinants of a mentee's' adaptability to a new job include -

1. the expectations and requirements of the role of a mentee,
2. the level of competency or skills possessed by the mentee and
3. the recognition by fellow colleagues at an organisational level (Allen et al, 2017).

This would in turn impact many areas for the mentee such as the duration of stay with the organisation and commitment level.

Cable and colleagues (2013) discovered that "emphasising a newcomer's "authentic self" being valued by the organisation, rather than emphasising to newcomers about how great the organisation was "would relate to increase performance and lower turnover (Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013). On the other hand, mentees who received a comprehensive mentoring performed better and proved to be a valuable asset to the organisation than mentees who did not receive a comprehensive mentoring (Allen et al, 2017).

Moreover, mentoring is valued for the assistance it gives in aiding with not only the pedagogical but also the emotional aspects of teaching (Alhija & Fresko, 2014). Mentoring relationships help to support educational therapists in various areas such as discussing lesson planning, lesson execution and monitoring a student's progress through analysis of their behaviour. An important issue here is providing critical feedback and how immediately the feedback given is acted upon.

In addition, a mentor also provides advice to mentees on how to handle communication with students, parents and colleagues, sharing and providing possible alternatives in dealing with such issues and the need to be self-aware of one's own emotions. By doing so, this encourages mentees to be more open to accepting different perspectives as well

as to pre-empt and empower them to reduce the impact of difficult situations.

Fletcher (1997) identified 4 stages in a mentee's professional development which occurs in a spiral progression involving the following stages:

Stage 1: Early Idealism

Mentees experience different levels of anxiety depending on whether they had prior teaching experience, amongst other factors.

Stage 2: Personal Survival

The ability for mentees to manage their own expectations, together with mentors' and organisation's expectations on their role of educational therapists, can be debated and this is linked to personal survival.

Stage 3: Alignment

The role of a mentor becomes a more active one by foreseeing, determining and addressing the individual needs of a mentee or even equipping a mentee with the necessary skills before a situation or an opportunity presents itself, providing positive support.

Stage 4: Consolidation

With reference to Maslow(1977) Fletcher states that consolidation involves 'self-actualisation' where this represents growth of the mentee towards fulfilment of their highest needs.

In a spiral progression model, new knowledge is learnt at the basic level

before more details is introduced, while retaining its relations to the basic knowledge. These stages suggest that a mentee may come into the job with some prior knowledge of the job requirements but this may not be sufficient until he/she is supported and guided by the mentor to manage his/her expectations to meet the organisation's expectations. The role of the mentor becomes more crucial when he/she supports the mentee so as to equip the mentee with skills in order to handle situations in a more positive way. Finally, the mentee has to master these skills as they grow in their knowledge of the job although this may prove a steep learning curve for some.

Mentor-mentee relationship

The attributes of both mentor and mentee will shape how the mentoring experience will be for the mentee. The extent of mentoring gained by mentees is dependent on the different types of attributes exhibited by both parties, and this would result in either positive or negative mentoring experiences (Tammy et al, 2017). According to Lofstrom and Eisenschmidt (2009), it was found that a productive mentor-mentee relationship needs to include the timeliness and the frequency of mentor-mentee sessions, the sharing of ideas and information stemming from a platform of mutual understanding, dependability between both parties, and respect.

Other factors to take into consideration would be the bridging of gap from mentees' existing level to the level of a skilled and independent mentee with confidence. In terms of successful

approaches, study conducted by Richter et al (2013) expressed that there was an increment in mentees becoming more effective and committed to their jobs with minimal experiences associated with teacher burnout via the use of a more constructivist mentoring approach than a transmissive mentoring approach.

Mentors' approach and mentees' expectations

A gap between mentors' approach and addressing mentees' expectations may exist (Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer Korthagen and Bergen, 2010). This may cause mentees to feel inadequate. With reference to Kilburg (2007), issues that occurred in a case study of mentor-mentee relationships involved being inconsistent in organisations' mission and goals, the effective and efficient usage of time, the need for more encouragement in the area of the well-being of mentees and improvement in the area of social skills between mentors and mentees.

Most mentees would have encountered all or some aspects of fruitful experiences with their mentors in the areas of compassion, listening and paraphrasing what they said, compiling information, challenging them with constructive feedback and asking 'hard' questions in the aim to better themselves as educational therapists. Ideally, this would include giving clear advice or suggestions and providing a sharing platform of varied perspectives or options (Crasborn et al, 2010).

Methods

Participants

As is typical in research of this type, although 28 educational therapists, 14 representing Group 1 and 14 representing Group 2, were requested to respond to a survey questionnaire, only 17 eventually

returned a reply. These educational therapists had gone through a rigorous training programme prior to teaching. 8 educational therapists received formal mentoring after they began teaching while 9 other educational therapists received theirs concurrent with teaching. 6 educational therapists were then selected for a face-to-face interview.

Table 1. Survey Statements

Mentoring Survey Statements—Rate your response from 1 to 5	
<i>1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Nether Disagree or Agree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree</i>	
No	Statement
1	It is essential for trainee teachers to have formal mentoring concurrent with classroom teaching
2	The feedback given by my mentors when I started teaching was helpful.
3	It was harder to manage the learning needs of students with learning differences without mentors.
4	I was more motivated to produce quality work when I had a mentor.
5	The timely support helped me to identify strategies to overcome my difficulties.
6	More emphasis was placed on problem-solving and reflection by my mentors that aided me to better myself as a teacher.
7	My confidence in teaching improved with formal mentoring support.
8	It was more helpful to have mentors providing guidance on work-related issues.
9	More ideas were exchanged during the formal mentoring period.
10	The support given by my mentors during the formal mentoring period helped improve my teaching.

Table 2. Interview Questions

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|----|---|
| 1. | What is your perception on receiving mentoring support AFTER teaching? (for Group 1 mentees) |
| 2. | What is your perception on receiving mentoring support CONCURRENT with teaching? (for Group 2 mentees) |
| 3. | What are the specific challenges teachers faced under both the mentoring approaches? |
| 4. | What are the advantages that teachers received from the mentoring programme? |

Setting

This research was conducted at DAS. DAS is a non-profit organisation providing specialist remediation services to students with dyslexia and other co-morbidities, aged 6 - 16 years old. Educational therapists at DAS are specially trained in the Orton-Gilligham programme to provide quality teaching to help students cope with their learning disorder. New educational therapists are prepared through an intensive 2 weeks training on the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of teaching in specific learning differences (SpLD) and a 6 months mentoring programme immediately thereafter.

Instrumentation

A mixed-method approach, comprising of a 10-statement survey questionnaire (Table.1) and a face-to-face interview (Table.2), were used in this study. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements given on the mentoring received on a Likert scale ranging from 1

to 5 (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Disagree or Agree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Mentees who had gone through mentoring in the last three years were surveyed via email and their responses were recorded. Six of them were then randomly selected to be interviewed. Their verbal responses were recorded and thereafter transcribed.

Results

The percentage of respondents in each group who responded to each level on the Likert scale was tabulated and presented in the figures 1 and 2.

It may be seen that the majority of respondents who had received formal mentoring after teaching were positive in their responses overall, with all of them agreeing and accepting that mentoring is essential while teaching. Nevertheless, 10% strongly disagreed that feedback had been helpful, and 20% strongly disagreed that feedback had increased their motivation, with a further percentage neither agreeing nor disagreeing with this statement.

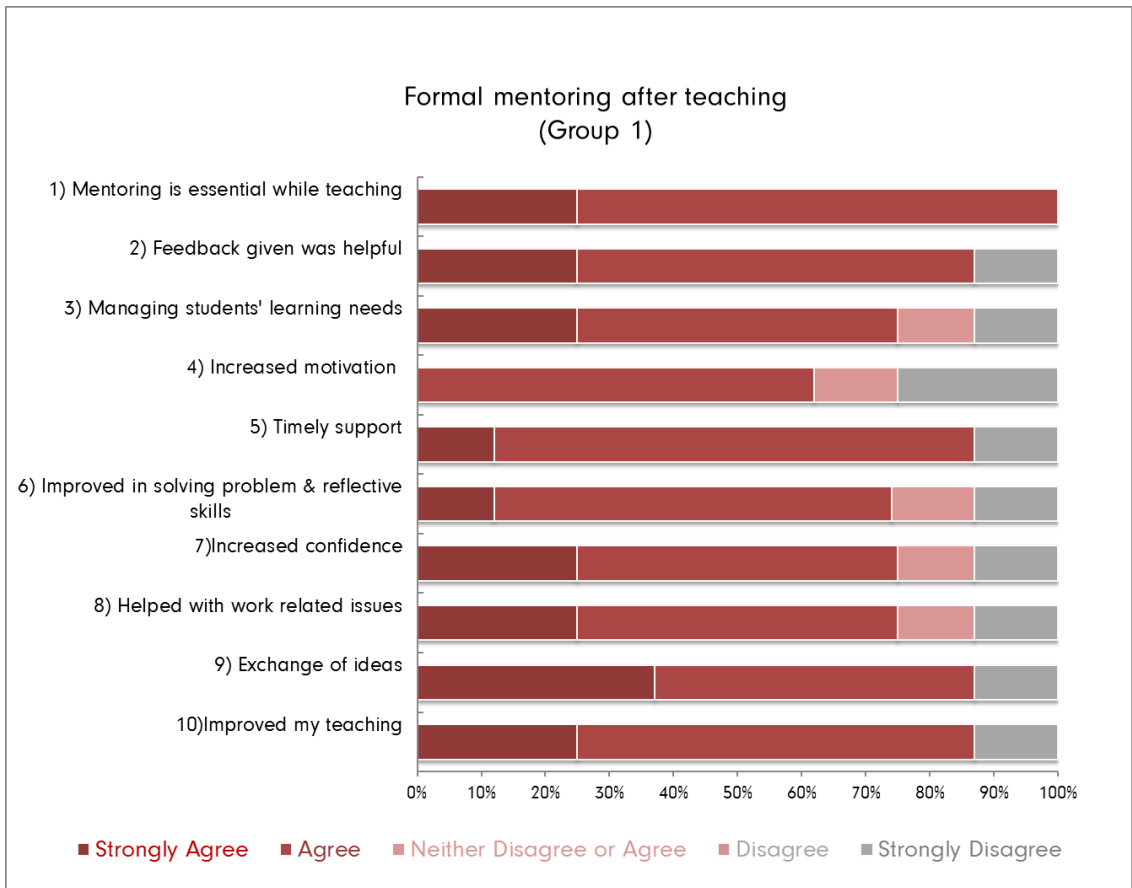


Figure 1. Formal mentoring after teaching

A similar pattern of responses was found for the group who received mentoring in conjunction with teaching (Group 2), although here a percentage did not think it essential they should receive mentoring while teaching. Overall here, there is less evidence of strong disagreement than for Group 1.

Based on the findings of this study, it demonstrated that mentors at DAS have managed to minimise the gap in knowledge for mentees and this was reflected both during and after the

mentoring sessions. Figure 1 and Figure 2 indicated the perceptions of mentees who had gone through both the mentoring programmes. The results indicated that regardless whether mentoring is conducted concurrent with teaching or after teaching, the process is beneficial for mentees as more than 60% of mentees from the two groups responded either strongly agree or agree on the survey statements. However, the percentage was higher for the group of mentees who received mentoring concurrent with teaching compared to those who received

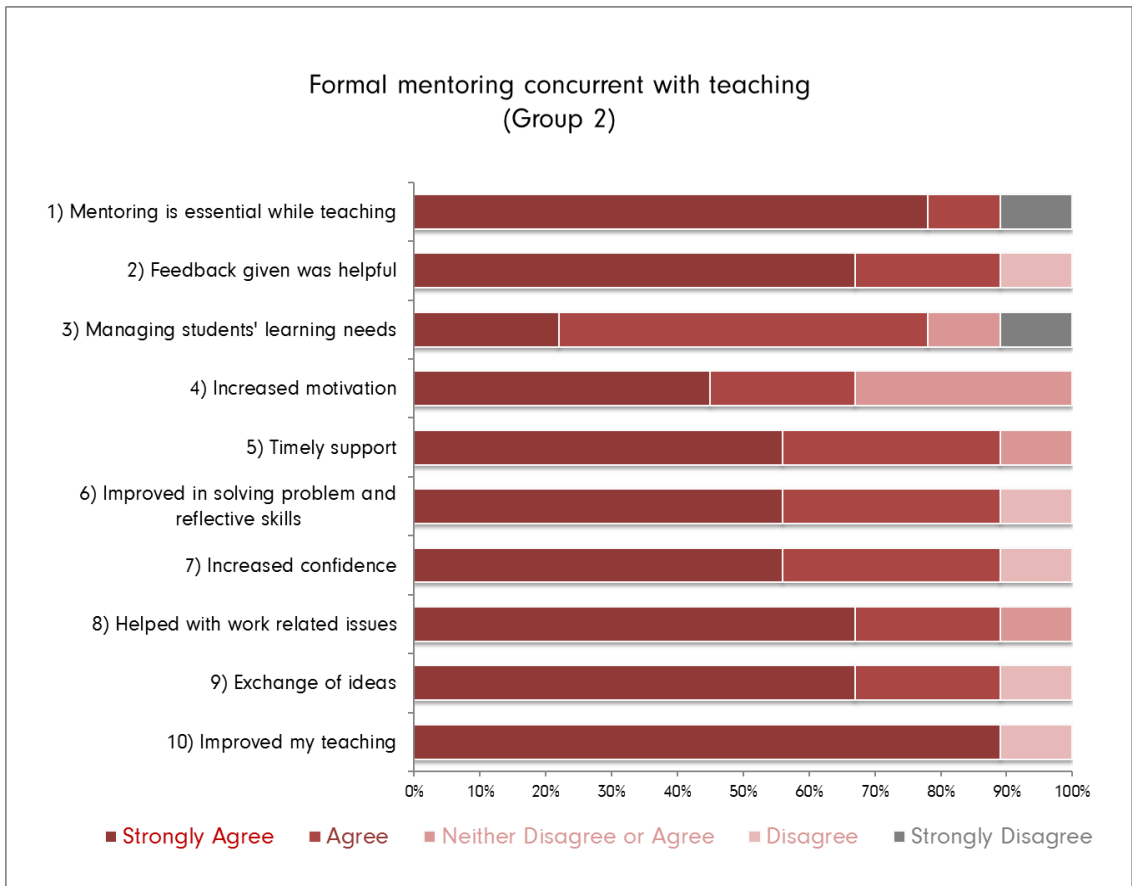


Figure 2. Formal mentoring concurrent with teaching

after teaching. On the other hand, there were also mentees who neither agree nor disagree and provided negative perceptions to the survey questions. The interview results in Table 3. showed the type of responses given by new educational therapists to the interview questions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate which of the two mentoring

approaches new educational therapists at DAS find most favourable. It was conducted to better understand which approach better equips new educational therapists with teaching skills and classroom management, and therefore should be maintained by the DAS when supporting new educational therapists. The results derived from Group 2 (concurrent mentoring) provided a stronger positive agreement between mentoring and factors such as increased confidence, improved teaching, problem

Table 3. Responses from Interviews

Interview Questions	Formal Mentoring CONCURRENT with Teaching	Formal Mentoring AFTER Teaching
What is your perception on receiving mentoring support after teaching?		"Would have preferred it earlier...to reduce the struggle..."
What is your perception on receiving mentoring support concurrent with teaching?	"Very important as it concretised concepts taught during teaching."	
What are the specific challenges Educational Therapists faced under both the mentoring approaches?	"Challenging with handling kids with co-morbidities."	"..kept going to my buddy... preferred to have structured 1 to 1 mentoring sessions."
What are the advantages that Educational Therapists received from the mentoring programme?	"...how to do differentiation..." "...seeing the different styles of teaching..."	"...knowledge–different skills and strategies." "Behavioural teaching strategies..."

solving and reflective skills as well as better management of students' learning needs as compared to Group 1. Although mentoring was provided after teaching for Group 1, 91% of the educational therapists indicated that mentoring had helped them improve in every aspect of teaching. On the other hand, the face-to-face interviews revealed that new educational therapists welcomed ideas and suggestions shared during mentoring when guidance and assistance was needed, but prompt support would have been appreciated. While this was possible for those who received mentoring concurrent with teaching, it was not possible for those educational therapists who received mentoring after teaching. Nevertheless, it was evident that both groups of educational therapists found mentoring to be valuable to their growth as a teacher.

Zerzan, Hess, Schur, Phillips and Rogotti (2009) stated that "managing up" (p.140) refers to a possible plan that contributes to a productive mentor-mentee relationship where the mentee is proactive. In addition to the mentor being prepared, mentees also take ownership of their professional and personal development in the organization. Pre-empting possible issues and seeking ways of acknowledging and working through these would be in favour of a positive mentor-mentee relationship in spite of differing viewpoints. Depending on the mentees' personality, they have to identify and acknowledge their current ability level and share with their mentors the most pressing concern that is affecting their teaching and this leads to more effective sessions. In addition to

this, understanding the working style of mentors is important. In regards to conveying and presenting information to the mentor, whether they are more inclined to either auditory or visual input, or a combination of both would also be beneficial for their relationship. Mentees' attitude towards receiving constructive feedback is also particularly vital and plays an important part in establishing and maintaining dynamic mentor-mentee relationships.

Limitations and Implications

It is evident from the study that providing mentoring concurrent with teaching has been found to be more favourable between the two approaches. In this study, a total of 28 educational therapists were surveyed and 3 were randomly selected from each group for an interview. Group 1, those who received support after teaching, a consistent small percentage were less positive and strongly disagreed with the statements on offer. It would be interesting to see if this is a consistent response from a specific selected participants and whether or not it reflected personality or other characteristics of this respondent.

Alternatively, different respondents may have contributed towards these results. In further research it would be useful to unpick these aspects. In addition, it may be that specific challenges that respondents have faced might also contribute to their responses, in terms of the behaviour and motivation of their students.

Moreover, the approach adopted may

well be dependent on the organisational needs when recruitment takes place. For example, a shortfall of teaching staff might mean that mentoring needed to be carried out after teaching had taken place. This has implications on whether new educational therapists can be supported simultaneously with formal teaching.

As the researchers had narrowed down the group of educational therapists to be studied to be those employed in the last three years, we were not able to garner sufficient participants for statistical analysis to be undertaken, which could result in a sampling error. A greater number of educational therapists surveyed could have given us data that is more reliable and valid.

In addition, it is clear that the statements provided in the survey were uniformly positive towards mentoring, which would not easily allow any negative impacts to be reported. However, it was clear from the results that a proportion of the educational therapists in Group 2 found that their motivation was poorly impacted by feedback after the event. In future research it would be useful to allow the respondents free comments to ascertain whether or not the relationship was always positive, or whether on occasion there was disagreement. This might well relate to dealing with criticism, no matter how constructively worded, which can be difficult to deal with for new educational therapists, and is inevitably easier when it is concurrent with the situation in hand.

Conclusion

The results clearly indicated that almost all the new educational therapists found mentoring to be valuable to their teaching practice, whether they are supported concurrently with teaching or otherwise. On the other hand, it is also evident from the results that there are new educational therapists who did not regard all aspects of the mentoring support positively. Nevertheless, mentoring undoubtedly has given new educational therapists tools for continuous growth. Additionally, the results served to inform that educational therapists would prefer to receive mentoring concurrent with teaching as it provides them with timely guidance and assistance with regards to teaching and addressing students' needs, managing classroom and student behaviour, exchanging ideas between mentors and mentees, and becoming more confident in teaching. Hence, it is recommended that this approach be considered for adoption when a mentoring programme is designed.

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