EXTENDING THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF EXTERNAL MENTORING FOR NEWLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS WITHIN A NATIONAL PROGRAMME OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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This paper explores key conceptual issues emerging from the first year of the deployment of External Mentors (EMs) as a core component supporting teachers' professional learning as part of the Welsh-government funded Masters in Educational Practice (MEP). The MEP is a major strategic development in UK teacher education, aimed at providing masters accredited professional learning for new teachers in Wales throughout the first three years of their career. Central to the design of the MEP is the nation-wide network of EMs who are experienced practitioners, employed outside of their mentees' schools, whose mentoring role is funded by the Welsh Government (WG). EMs engage the mentees in reflective dialogue about their developing practice, values and understanding of their role as a teacher, aimed at improving the quality of learning and attainment of pupils. The related long-term goal is that external mentoring builds capacity for school improvement by enhancing the professional knowledge and practice of teachers, with participants developing the expertise to become agents of change within a developing national network with mentoring at its core. A range of research has identified the importance of exposing teachers to external perspectives as part of their professional learning but there is a significant lack of research literature on external mentoring in this context (Hobson and McIntyre, 2013) and even less related to NQTs. The paper examines evaluation material collected throughout the first year of the MEP, from EM training days, EMs' narrative 'accounts of practice' and from the development a mentoring skills audit.

Findings provide a foundation for developing practice and suggest a research agenda which can contribute to addressing the gap in the knowledge base concerning external mentoring. Four themes are identified: professional community-building; re-forging relations with the professional knowledge base; mentoring the mentors; and establishing principles of equity for dialogic practices. Analysis of these themes suggests that external mentoring is characterised by dilemmas and uncertainties encountered by EMs which go beyond implementation issues arising from an ambitious and complex programme, related to assumed certainties and orthodoxies about academic knowledge, leadership roles and professional expertise for both EMs and mentees. Re-conceptualising external mentoring in this context has implications for the future deployment of EMs in early professional learning contexts linked to school improvement.