

Follow their lead

What role does mentoring play in maintaining a quality early years workforce? **Annette Rawstrone** looks at what's available for trainee Early Years Teachers



Mentoring can be a time-consuming and difficult role. Yet many early years practitioners report that the process of becoming a mentor, which often involves dedicated training, provides them with a myriad of benefits, including a fresh new perspective on their job, and new skills.

Mentoring is involved in all early years graduate-level training, the most sophisticated form being found with Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT). Launched five years ago as part of a drive towards a graduate-led workforce, EYITT comes with up to £14,000 of Government funding per trainee. It is the only form of early years training where a mentor has to assess the candidate against professional standards.

What makes a mentor?

If the trainee is in a job then they can bring an approved mentor from their setting. Debra Laxton, senior lecturer in education at the University of Chichester, says, 'We want a mentor to have EYTS, EYPS

or Level 6, but if you're upskilling a sector, that can't always be guaranteed. Sometimes we may have a Level 3 manager as mentor who we will monitor carefully and can be really effective. The setting can choose the mentor, but they need to be agreed with us and attend the training.'

Other models, such as at the University of Greenwich, have mentors recruited by the university. These range from early years specialists and retired early years further education lecturers to alumni. Mentors and trainees are supported by a link tutor from the university who meets with the trainee and the mentor around four times a year, depending on the support needed (see case study). Mentors and trainees also receive training together around every six weeks. In the maintained sector, schools tend to have a trained mentor who carries on with the role year on year.

Jo Elsey, director of EYTS programmes at the University of Reading, adds, 'Mentors work with trainees to develop a realistic timeline of activities in order for them to gather evidence against the Teachers' Standards (Early Years).

“ One mentor who went through the process last year said it helped her to reflect on her own practice ”

'A trainee needs an advocate who can allow them the opportunity to be a "change agent" and work on specific change projects and then champion them with other staff. It is very hard for a trainee to demonstrate the necessary leadership skills without this support.'

A mentor's responsibilities include:

- Observing the trainee fortnightly and giving feedback.
- Completing trainee assessments against the Teachers' Standards (Early Years) – these are reviewed by the link tutor.
- Monitoring progress and wider professional development.
- Holding weekly mentor meetings to discuss and review achievements and targets.
- Jointly observing trainee practice with the link tutor.

At the University of Chichester, mentors and link tutors meet at the first induction 'so they are singing from the same hymn sheet'.

'At the starting point the link tutor will go out and visit the setting. They will conduct a joint observation with the mentor, which is helpful because they both watch

case study



Grace Fairbourn, head of operations, A Step Ahead nursery group

Ms Fairbourn was nursery manager at Little Laura's Nursery in West Sussex when her

colleague, Natasha Young (right), expressed an interest in undertaking EYTS at the University of Chichester.

'I'd gained EYPS and found it worthwhile so I encouraged Natasha to do EYT with me as mentor. I thought it would be great to share my passion and knowledge in order to support her.

'I didn't know what to fully expect from the mentor role but training at the university outlined the expectations, workload and support we'd receive, especially from link tutors. It was good to meet other mentors and through the year we were invited to other training sessions where we could share experiences and advice.

'The biggest challenge of being a mentor is time. Finding time for weekly meetings and fortnightly observations with Natasha was tricky, especially as she was equally

enthusiastic and we had loads to discuss. We met for an hour before she started work in the mornings and I did a lot of paperwork in the evenings.

'As a manager I'm used to giving critical feedback, but it could be tough for those not practised in it. Despite this, it was nerve-wracking conducting my first observation alongside the link tutor – I was constantly wondering if I was saying the right things and what they wanted to hear. It's important to be as honest and frank as you can with feedback; it benefits the trainee and the whole setting.

'My practice and the nursery's has improved because Natasha's knowledge and enthusiasm rubbed off and we adapted our practice. Being a mentor reignited my passion for the early years. It was also good for my CV and has given me confidence to support a chain of managers in my new role. A bonus of being a mentor is being in the loop with the EYT community and attending network meetings. My knowledge continues to be updated. I'm now trying to encourage practitioners in my new team to undertake the course. I'd happily mentor again.'



Natasha Young, Early Years Teacher and SENCO, Little Laura's Nursery

'A condition of taking the EYT place was having someone

suitable to mentor me. It's a big ask but Grace was very supportive. I was lucky to have her as a mentor.

'Grace was confident whereas some mentors, although qualified, lacked this and needed support from the university. We hit the ground running. Grace had to observe my practice and had the confidence to give genuine constructive feedback.

'In order to progress on the course I needed to implement change, which was hard at times because I was junior and some ideas were not popular. I needed a mentor who was on my side and not afraid of change.

'I would advise anyone with the experience to be a mentor. There is a lot of support from the university and it enables the whole staff team to be more reflective. We thought about the ethos of our setting, what makes us different and special and what we wanted to achieve.'

the student together, discuss the feedback and write up the observation. This gives a good practice observation for the mentor to continue,' says Ms Laxton.

Being a mentor can be complex because of the possibly conflicting pastoral and assessment roles they must perform, but Louise Atkins, EYTS co-ordinator at the University of Greenwich, says this dual role pushes the trainee to reach their goals.

'Mentor training is rigorous,' she says. 'We look at the standards, the course itself and the expectations of the role. There is also bespoke training for the mentor group around areas where they may be struggling, often around target-setting.

'We upskill the mentor and the mentor upskills the trainee to be an Early Years Teacher.'

Ms Elsey adds, 'As there is not, at present, an established culture of mentoring within the early years sector, it is important that we support mentors in their critical role in order for trainees to have the best experience throughout the programme.'

Challenges

Finding suitably qualified mentors who have a commitment to ongoing education isn't easy. Ms Laxton says mentors are taking on a 'high-pressure role and need to be more reflective than the trainee' while also having extra demands on their time.

'Initially mentors often feel that they lack confidence because they are fearful of the unknown, all the paperwork and the standards. They are concerned about the time it is going to take,' she says. 'There can also be issues with other staff members who do not understand the time out that the trainee is having or why they are being supported in that way. It needs to be explained that the setting is receiving money and the trainee needs to do placements and be observed.'

Despite the pressures, the University of Chichester has trained 30 mentors in the past three years and just one has needed to have their role taken over by the link tutor.

And those pressures are often outweighed by the positives, says Ms Laxton. 'We see the mentor as the gatekeeper to change happening with the trainee, carrying out audits,

bringing their findings to mentor meetings and discussing them.'

Ms Atkins adds, 'One mentor who went through the process last year said it helped her to reflect on her own practice and how the setting is run. It helped her to gather evidence, critically assess the setting and know how to drive practice forwards.'

Mentors report personal benefits including:

- More confidence when carrying out joint observations with Ofsted.
- An improvement in their ability to observe staff.
- Appraisal meetings becoming more meaningful – listening to staff rather than telling them what to do.
- Improved confidence in their knowledge and practice.
- Enjoyment gained from being involved in a learning community.
- Continuing professional development – mentors can undertake the Institute of Education's Master's-level mentoring module.
- Experience to add to their CV. ■

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