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Experiences of Mentor Teachers in Supporting Pre-service Teachers' Professional Growth and Development Using Conversation and Professional Standards

Ondine Bradbury, Ange Fitzgerald

Abstract

Background/purpose. Positioned within the Australian context, this study explores the experiences of mentor teachers using professional standard-informed Conversation Cards to support the professional growth of pre-service teachers. With a particular focus on practical solutions, the research investigates the opportunities and challenges mentor teachers face during standard-informed conversations aimed at enhancing pre-service teachers' development.

Materials/methods. An exploratory case study methodology was employed for the larger study; however, this paper focuses on a focus group discussion (FGD) with five teachers from rural schools participating in a structured professional experience program. The FGD, involving teachers with varying mentoring experiences, examined their use of Conversation Cards in mentoring. Data were analyzed through the lens of Bandura's self-efficacy theory, focusing on cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes.

Results. The study found that cards provided structure and focus during mentoring conversations, aligning discussions with teacher standards and enhancing professionalism. Cognitive benefits included more organized and thorough feedback. However, some mentors felt the cards made conversations less natural and were challenging due to assumed proficiency levels and complex language.

Conclusion. The study contributes to improving the quality of teacher education and professional development by supporting mentor teachers with structured yet adaptable tools, ultimately benefiting educational practices for future teachers.

1. Introduction

The mentoring of pre-service teachers is a professional expectation (Sempowicz & Hudson, 2012). In the Australian context, the setting for this paper, teachers are acknowledged for taking on this role by paying a small stipend and perhaps a time allocation (Le Cornu, 2015). There is, however, a strong sentiment that taking on a mentoring role is not for or about the money. Internationally, how this role is valued and resourced may differ. However, the sense of commitment in school-based settings to supporting future teachers' professional growth and development remains the same (Cheng & Zhao, 2023).

A range of expectations permeate understanding of what it means to be a mentor teacher. These expectations are heavily influenced by factors such as one's own experiences of and professional development around mentoring over time, both as a pre-service and mentor teacher, as well as the values that drive approaches to what it is to be a teacher (Ellis et al., 2020). With three key stakeholders involved in this process – teachers, pre-service teachers, and initial teacher education (ITE) providers – it is inevitable that understandings may not always align (Izadinia, 2016). This misalignment raises questions about how the act of mentoring is supported and how the expectations inherent in the role are conveyed to ensure that consistency and quality remain at the core of this process.

The requirements of mentor teachers in Australia exist in a changing regulatory space (Larsen et al., 2023). A particularly influential contributing factor to these changes has been the introduction of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs), which includes a graduate level (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2017a). In this context, 'graduate level' refers to expectations of pre-service teachers' performance against the standards by completion of their ITE qualification. This leveling brings with it a level of accountability from ITE institutions to ensure that pre-service teachers are, in fact, graduating at that level and that there is evidence to support this judgment (AITSL, 2017a). A way of achieving this is by requiring mentor teachers to report on the development and growth of pre-service teachers against the APSTs for each professional experience (Larsen et al., 2023). There are two particularly challenging elements inherent in this requirement: (1) differing expectations of what it means to achieve a standard and (2) the relatively new nature of the APSTs means that many mentor teachers do not have an entrenched understanding (Birch, 2024). These challenges become particularly evident in how mentor teachers approach their conversations with pre-service teachers around the APSTs and their professional growth (Le Cornu, 2015). While the body of knowledge around school-based mentor teachers is extensive, this paper addresses an emerging gap in practical solutions to address the above-mentioned challenges.

Addressing this 'problem' informed the genesis of this project and led to developing a set of Conversation Cards for mentor and pre-service teachers to use during professional experiences. While many ITE providers outline mentoring guidance and suggestions in sources like handbooks, uniquely, this resource intended to provide a formalized way for mentor teachers to engage with the APSTs, enact relevant professional conversations, and support pre-service teachers in moving towards the graduate level (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2014). This paper will focus on the experiences of the mentor teachers. However, a paper on pre-service teachers' perspectives on this resource has also been published (Bradbury et al., 2020). Each card had several prompt questions to guide collaborative discussion and reflection between the mentor and pre-service teacher, as well as with peers and as part of self-reflection, over different stages of a placement experience (see Figure 1).

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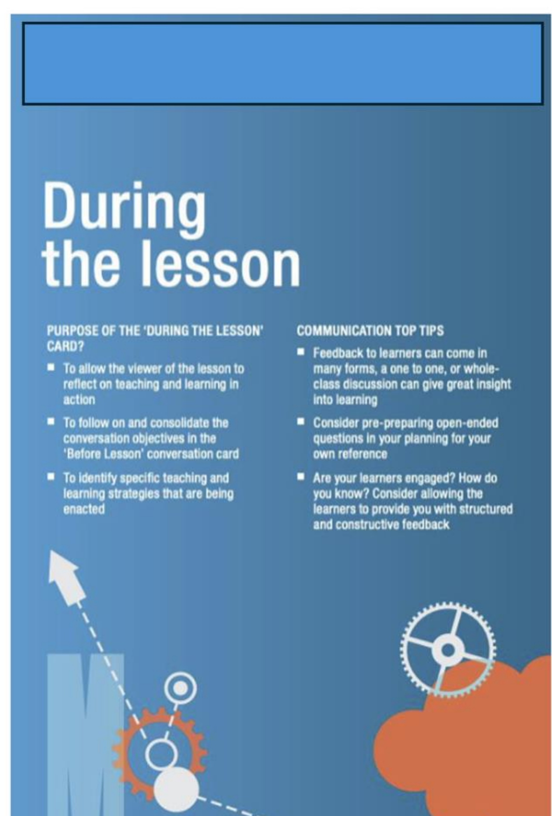

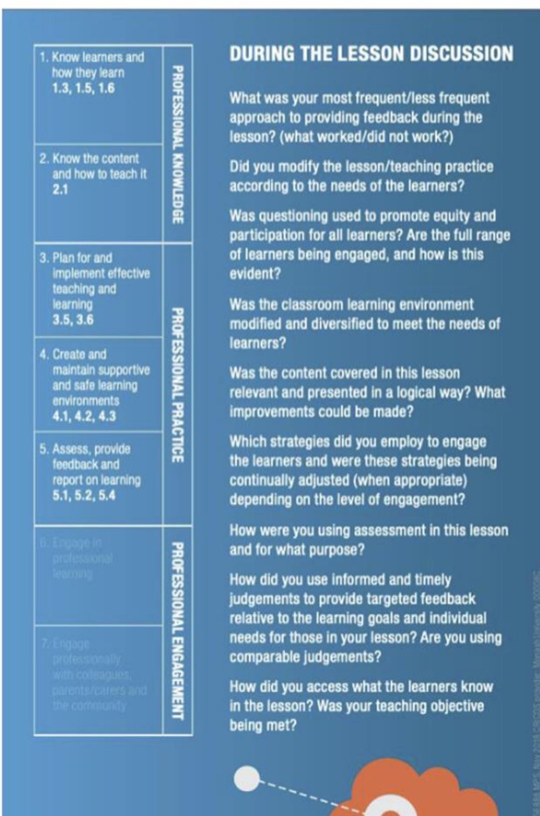

Figure 1. Example of the 'During the lesson' Conversation Card (Bradbury et al.,2020)

The questions constituted an operationalized version of each of the 37 focus areas within the seven APSTs. For example, the focus areas connected with assessing student learning (5.1) and identifying professional learning needs (6.1) could be explored in conversation through addressing the following question: Which aspects of assessment do you feel confident in and which ones would you like to work on and why? Each focus area was touched on at least once, but some up to three or four times. There were no restrictions on how the cards were used, as the initial dissemination of the cards was a pilot study examining the subsequent use and feedback about the cards within a mentor and pre-service teacher placement setting. This paper aims to delve deeper into the role of scaffolded conversations for mentor teachers in supporting professional experiences and whether using prompt questions as provocations for practice on Conversation Cards can support mentor teachers in using the APSTs as a tool for growth and guidance. The research question driving this paper is: What opportunities and challenges did mentor teachers face in having APST-informed conversations to support pre-service teachers' professional growth and development?

2. Literature Review

In providing some conceptual framing, this paper focuses on understanding mentoring within teacher education, particularly in the Australian context, before unpacking the possibilities and challenges inherent in undertaking a mentoring role. These key areas are explored in more detail below in relation to nationally and internationally relevant literature as positioned within the regulatory space at the time of the study (e.g., AITSL, 2014; 2017a, 2017b; Craven et al., 2014).

2.1. Mentoring in the Teacher Education Context

Over the past two decades, ITE in Australia has witnessed a steady change from pre-service teachers being 'supervised' on a school placement to being 'mentored' as they undertake professional experience (Ledger et al., 2020). This shift in language may not seem noteworthy. However, it signals a significant change in how future teachers are prepared for the classroom and

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how in-service teachers are valued in this preparation process. While the literature is not definitive on mentoring, even when restricted to ITE, most interpretations point to a hierarchical relationship (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2021). This relationship is between the knowledgeable and experienced mentor and the novice mentee who, in the context of this paper, is seeking guidance and support as they learn and develop the skills, attributes, and knowledge required to be a teacher. Somewhat missing from this simplified understanding of mentoring are the complexities inherent in this role and subsequent practices, not all of which might be the 'best' or most appropriate (Stanulis et al., 2019).

In moving beyond the relational aspects of mentoring, research nationally (e.g., Ellis et al., 2020) and internationally (e.g., Cullingford, 2017) highlights other more procedural dimensions involved in mentoring pre-service teachers such as the teaching process, developmental improvement, and contextual factors. While, even in this brief description of mentoring in the teacher education context, the role of a mentor is incredibly important in terms of preparing pre-service teachers to be classroom-ready, there are still minimal structures or universal requirements around this role (Chitpin, 2010). Darling-Hammond (2017) highlights that internationally, including in the Australian context (e.g., Victorian Institute of Teaching [VIT] (2019)), significant resources are diverted to supporting in-service teachers to develop the skills necessary to mentor graduate teachers as they enter the profession. However, this resourcing does not extend to those who mentor pre-service teachers. While there may be some similarities in the mentoring process, there are also some significant differences in what is required. Some Australian ITE providers individually implement programs and structures to guide mentors and build their skills in working productively with pre-service teachers (e.g., Grimmett et al., 2018). However, the assignment, requirements, and support given to mentors working with pre-service teachers remains, at best, ad-hoc.

2.2. Mentoring and the Possibilities

The research identifies several components considered 'identified best practices' in mentoring pre-service teachers. However, Brondyk and Searby (2013) point out that as they grappled with this notion of 'identified best practice,' they were faced with a difficult task due to the plethora of terms, conceptualizations, and applications to define mentoring. They did hone their focus to three key considerations that must be present for a mentoring approach to be considered as identified best practice – the mentoring practice must be (i) attainable, accessible, and affordable, (ii) substantiated by research, and (iii) able to achieve its intended goal. Brondyk and Searby's (2013) work provides a useful framework for considering the possibilities inherent in mentoring from a holistic perspective.

In considering mentoring within the context of ITE more holistically, Ambrosetti et al. (2014) developed a mentoring model based on three components – contextual, relational, and developmental. As part of this model, they identified a range of mentoring actions that could take place between the mentor and mentee to support each component. For example, Ambrosetti et al. (2014) identified that for the relational mentoring component, actions might include encouragement, inclusion, and collegiality; for the developmental element, actions like reflection, role modeling, and feedback were identified as valuable; and for the contextual aspect, there was a focus on actions that represented the work and behaviors of a teacher.

Further, White et al. (2010) teased out some Australian-based professional experience practices that positively support pre-service teachers' mentoring. The practices of particular focus are learning communities and learning circles. Learning communities can take various forms, but at their core, they are focused on pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and teacher educators working collectively using professional conversations (White et al., 2010). Somewhat similar in nature, learning circles are about engaging in professional dialogue. However, in this instance, groups of pre-service teachers in the same school context support each other through peer mentoring (White et al., 2010).

2.3. Mentoring and the Challenges

While there are numerous possibilities inherent in how the mentoring of pre-service teachers (noting that this term refers to students studying to be a teacher as opposed to graduate teachers who are already qualified to teach) occurs, regardless of the approach, this process is not without its challenges. Based on an Australian context, Patrick's (2013) research explored the conflicting perspectives of pre-service teachers and their mentor teachers in relation to professional experience. This work uncovered that the pre-service teachers viewed their time in schools as providing opportunities to be innovative in their practice and collaborate with their mentors. In contrast, mentors consider this partnership to be one of assimilation into the profession. The tensions arising from these differing viewpoints raise questions about the expectations inherent in both what the mentor-mentee relationship and mentoring processes are to achieve.

In further exploring mentoring relationships, Graves' (2010) case study research revealed the need for greater clarity around expectations, ongoing communication, and a significant investment of time if positive relationships are to form between mentors and pre-service teachers. The implications of this work point to the need for mentor training, extended professional experiences, and more explicit guidance from ITE providers around mentor and mentee expectations. From the perspective of a teacher educator working to support mentor teachers and pre-service teachers during professional experiences, McDonough's (2014) autobiographical study documented the challenges she faced working in the mentoring space. She attributed these tensions to issues related to her obligations, loyalties, and advocacy for different stakeholders in the mentoring process, especially during times of conflict between mentor and mentee. This work challenged her to really question what it means to be a mentor and how this learning could be applied to support pre-service and mentor teachers to view mentoring differently.

2.4. The Influence of APSTs on Mentor Teachers and Mentoring Conversations

While the APSTs were not introduced specifically to assist with mentoring, they were introduced with a graduate level to ensure pre-service teachers entered the profession with the knowledge and skills required to be 'classroom ready' (Craven et al., 2014). This leveling is predominantly applied in ITE programs through the reporting on professional experience and, more recently, the Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA) task, an assessment tool used by university-based teacher educators (rather than school-based mentor teachers) in the final year of study (akin to a 'capstone' project for ITE) as a mandatory requirement for graduation (see: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2017b). Despite this significant focus in ITE, the APSTs are still very much in a transition period when it comes to how they are applied and understood on the ground in schools and by teachers to frame professional development and growth. As a result, when mentor teachers are faced with reporting shaped around the APSTs, they are often unsure how to interpret what is required. This is both in terms of what to focus on in a pre-service teachers' practice and the expectations from ITE providers in demonstrating the standards.

While professional conversations about learning to teach and developing practice in the classroom are identified as a key approach to supporting pre-service teacher growth (Langdon, 2014), they remain one of the biggest challenges in the mentoring process. A recent study of mentoring conversations undertaken by Mena et al. (2017) identified that the mentors tended to be directive in their approach to mentoring and that they dominated the dialogue. These findings highlight commonly experienced tensions that influence the quality of and the subsequent learning that can flow from meaningful conversations about practice. Much research in this area tends to focus on interventions to ameliorate these concerns. For example, Helgevold et al. (2015) work examined the key focus areas that emerged during mentoring conversations and explored mediating tools (such as

lesson plans, curriculum documents, and protocols around the suggested approach to Lesson Study) that might have a positive influence on the nature of these discussions.

Working from Strong and Baron's (2004) findings that 70% of mentoring conversations are made up of mentors' suggestions to pre-service teachers about instructional matters and classroom management, Helgevold et al. (2015) study not only confirmed this focus on organization and instructions as dominant topics but that this pattern of discourse is hard to shift. While Church and Bateman (2019) reported success in changing the nature of mentoring conversations through their professional development approach based on hypothetical scenarios and role plays, it was time-intensive and not easily scalable. The APSTs offer somewhat of a solution by providing a guide to meaningful topics (including planning for and implementing effective teaching and learning, creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning environments, and assessing and reporting on student learning) to inform conversations. However, work is still needed to determine how this is enacted to ensure a genuine dialogue between mentor and pre-service teacher.

3. Methodology

Case study methodology has long been widely used in educational research as it allows for investigating a phenomenon of interest as situated within a real-world context (Merriam, 1985). This methodological approach makes sense in this context as there was a desire to understand the lived experiences of mentor teachers and their use of the Conversation Cards. Importantly, this study was conceived and designed as an exploratory case study (Priya, 2021). However, to improve coherence and clarity in this paper, only one element is reported (see Bradbury et al., 2020) for another component of this research). While multiple data collection points were used (Yin, 2019), a cornerstone of case study research, this particular aspect draws only on the findings gathered through a focus group discussion (FGD).

The FGD participants were five classroom teachers drawn from four schools and one early childhood center mentoring pre-service teachers in a rural professional experience program undertaken with <<Deidentified>> University. The schools and the center were clustered in a region located in South-Eastern Australia, approximately 150km from the nearest metropolitan center. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 'Remoteness Areas' (RA) rating (ABS, 2021), the region is considered 'inner regional' based on its relative geographic remoteness, which is largely determined based on proximity to services and key service centers. Unfortunately, scant demographic details related to the participants were gathered. However, the composition of the focus group is detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overall Demographic Details of Teacher Participants.

Gender	4 females	1 male	
Teaching background	1 early childhood	3 Primary	1 secondary
Mentoring experience	2 early careers (< 5 years)	3 mid-careers (5 to 15 years)	

The pseudonyms in Table 2 were used to report the data from the FGD.

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Table 2. Specific Demographic Details for Each Teacher Participant.

Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching background	Mentoring experience
Juanita	Female	Primary	Early career
Laura	Female	Early childhood	Mid-career
Mia	Female	Secondary	Early career
Tameka	Female	Primary	Mid-career
Tye	Male	Primary	Mid-career

The FGD protocol required the participants to share their experiences of using the Conversation Cards as part of their mentoring approach with pre-service teachers and included questions such as:

- How the *Conversation Cards* were used
- Any improvement that could be made to the design of the cards
- Any feedback on the 'content' of the questions within the cards themselves

The FGD was conducted in order for the researcher to "listen to the participants and build understanding" (Creswell, 2009, p. 26) based on what was heard through conversation. The researcher (Author 1) who facilitated the focus group was known to the participants as a coordinator for the professional experience program but was removed from the school and center contexts in which they were each mentoring a pre-service teacher. As a result, some consideration was given to minimizing any effects that might be present due to knowing the researcher and any resultant biases. The FDG was held in a meeting room at a school located in the region's main economic hub and lasted about one hour. Audio recording enabled the researcher to pay close attention to the participant's contributions and allowed follow-up on any emergent conversation topics (Liamputtong, 2011) before being transcribed.

As a means for understanding the mentor teachers' experiences using the Conversation Cards, Bandura's social-cognitive theory was adopted, focusing on self-efficacy as a lens for sense-making, we acknowledge that this particular theoretical framing was adopted preceding the data collection process based on an emergent understanding of the collected. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs about their ability to accomplish an activity or task, and whilst doing so, they can influence their mindset (Schunk, 1995). Efficacy beliefs play a significant part in how individuals self-regulate their motivation where goals, challenges, and expectations are concerned (Bandura, 2003). Levels of efficacy can influence the individual's propensity and choice of "challenges to undertake" (Bandura, 2003, p. 80), the effort they will apply, and their willingness to persevere through challenges. Additionally, levels of efficacy can influence whether individuals perceive obstacles as positive or negative or in a "self-enhancing or self-hindering way" (Bandura, 2003, p. 80). The cumulative factors can then, in turn, influence the course and direction of the individual's personal development. The thematic analysis of the data from this study applied Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-efficacy as a 'framing' for understanding the individual's experiences of the Conversation Cards in relation to their own mentoring practices. The decision to use this approach over other sense-making mechanisms was intended to provide a unique way of understanding the lived experiences of the mentor teachers and how they came to conceptualize their role as mentors.

While qualitative studies generally allow for the emergence of rich, 'thick' descriptions of the phenomena experienced (Merriam, 1998), a deductive rather than inductive approach was taken for this study. In this instance, this approach was enacted by applying the four major processes that

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Bandura (1993) associates with perceptions of self-efficacy - cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection – to the FGD transcript data set. An explanation of each process is provided below (Bandura, 1993):

- *Cognitive processes* involve how individuals acquire, process, and retain information related to their abilities.
- *Motivational processes* involve how efficacy beliefs influence an individual's effort and persistence in the face of challenges and obstacles.
- *Affective processes* involve how efficacy beliefs influence an individual's emotional reactions to events.
- *Selection processes* involve how efficacy beliefs influence an individual's choices and actions.

For the data analysis process, Author 2 conducted the first analysis as they had not facilitated the FGD or been associated with the rural professional experience program. As an experienced educational researcher, and while familiar with professional experience in a field, Author 2 provided a sense of distance that positioned them to analyze the data as more of an outsider. Author 2 followed the steps outlined below:

1. The FGD transcript was read in one sitting, and notes were taken to identify where each of the four self-efficacy processes (cognitive, motivational, affective, selection) was evident in the conversation.
2. The transcript was re-read, and the identification of the four processes was revisited for accuracy and authenticity.
3. The transcripts contained quotes relating to the four processes, and the quotes that best exemplified each process were identified.
4. A discussion was had with Author 1, who conducted the FGD, to share the exemplary quotes and garner their insights.
5. Following this discussion, the number of quotes was reduced to ensure a strong alignment with each of the four self-efficacy processes.
6. Finally, these decisions were triangulated with Author 1.

The authors have been intimately involved in developing the Conversation Cards. While the analysis process was deductive, there is an acknowledgment of how their inherent biases and preconceptions may have influenced how the data was gathered, interpreted, and presented (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

4. Results

The findings from the FGD have been interpreted using four processes associated with self-efficacy – cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection – to understand the experiences of the five mentor teachers using the Conversation Cards. Illustrative FGD quotes are presented to understand how the mentors used the APST-informed prompt questions to support the growth and development of pre-service teachers. More in-depth insights into the opportunities and challenges inherent in these findings follow.

4.1. Cognitive Processes

How the mentors saw the use of the cards from a cognitive perspective included how they could structure their feedback. Comments included that the cards "kept us more focused in the conversation" (Juanita). The cards were seen as a guide to be used alongside the report toward the standards, and coupling these together "made things a lot easier" (Mia) for the mentor when assessing the pre-service teacher's progress. Further explanation on the positive nature of having a supporting set of prompts followed as Tameka stated: "So, it was good that it was not just the report that way, that it was not just on me," signaling that they had felt validated in their abilities and that

their understandings were being reflected in the prompts within the cards. Links between purpose and practical applications mirrored in the classroom were discussed by Juanita, who stated, “It was following the standards as well as following the curriculum. I think it was really nice”.

Tye’s perception of the application of the cards in their contexts juxtaposed that of mentors shared above. He discussed that sitting with the cards and reading from them could “Seem a little bit forced”; however, the cards also “added a little bit more meat to what could have been a quite negative discussion” if the cards were otherwise not being used. From their interpretation of the pre-service teacher’s abilities, Mia was a first-time mentor and noted that the cards had “assumed a level of proficiency that perhaps my student teacher did not have.” In a similar vein, they went on to discuss that the cards required simple everyday language, “language that the student teacher would understand but still have an educational slant to it.” Contextually, Laura reflected that the busyness of the school day had impacted their frequency of using the cards. They stated that having when and where to use the cards was something that they “had to get [their] head around” and that having the cards “in the back of your head” was preferable to holding or using the physical cards.

4.2. Motivational Processes

From the outset, the notion of motivation was evident in how the mentors used the cards to guide and enhance their mentoring practice. Tameka articulated a sense of feeling reassured by their current approach, “I think [the cards] may have been a bit confronting if I had pulled these out initially, but knowing that I had addressed [the standards], I was not too stressed.” Equally, Tye also felt these conversational prompts enriched and guided their practice, “I just had [the cards] by me and was referring to some things to focus my observations, which was really good.” Inherent in these insights was a growing development around professionalism in relation to mentoring requirements and expectations when guided by the teacher standards.

> I think it is good that [pre-service teachers] see from the outset [through the cards] that it is not just the expectations of your particular school. However, it is actually a professional expectation that these [standards] are covered in every classroom in Australia (Tye).

In motivating mentors to “make their conversations professional” (Tameka), the cards were identified as being “valuable for both the mentor and the student teacher to have them to continually look back on.” A motivational element was evident in how the cards streamlined processes for mentors by “making the marking of their reports heaps easier” (Tameka). This ease was largely because the mentor and pre-service teacher “had had these conversations, so [the mentor] was able to recall that conversation for assessing each of the standards” (Tameka). Further, Tye shared that “[the cards] definitely helped with the assessment because sometimes if you do not have [the cards], you just get to the assessment, and you are trying to go through your notes.” The mentoring conversations, as supported by the cards, assisted in providing mentors with confidence that the standards had been addressed and that they had been discussed in detail.

4.3. Affective Processes

The emotional connection with the cards for the mentors was largely through their role as a guide for conversation. Sometimes, the use of the cards was more implicit. For example, as Mia shared, “I also did not really use [the cards] during our discussion but have them there really for myself to check over once we had had a discussion.” Tameka articulated a similar sentiment, “It is a great little checklist for ourselves that, yes, we need to discuss that.” however, she did go on to express the need for consistency for pre-service teachers if they are to truly experience the value of and benefit from the conversation cards. Conversely, the use of the cards was more explicit for other

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mentors, particularly those beginning their mentoring of the pre-service teachers, as captured in the quote below:

> I found that the guidance in the 'post-lesson' discussion card meant that, as it was my first time having a student teacher, it allowed me to show them where to improve and talk about their strengths (Juanita).

The mentors also demonstrated creative connections with the cards to foster reflective skills in their pre-service teachers and colleagues. Mia was able to determine the concerns that the pre-service teacher they were mentoring had about their own practice and use the cards "to openly discuss where she would like to go [with her practice], and we got good feedback out of [that process." For Laura, the cards provided opportunities to "discuss and moderate [mentoring practices] with other teachers" as a form of professional development and growth as a mentor.

4.4. Selection Processes

There was overwhelming feedback across the five mentor teachers that the cards assisted in their decision-making processes when conversing with pre-service teachers about their teaching practice. This support ranged from providing "a focus" (Juanita) to being "a good reference point" (Tye) to having a "good format to support deeper conversation" (Laura). Tye noted that he used the cards as a guide as he found that they did "[make} conversation with them less natural," he felt experienced enough as a mentor to personalize the questions to promote a more free-following discussion. Alternatively, Tameka used the cards to ensure that she "tagged some things that [she] felt had not impressed already in the conversation," which speaks to a sense of "accountability" (Tye) for both mentor teachers and pre-service teachers.

An element that impacted the mentors using the cards to guide their mentoring conversations was timeliness. As Mia shared, "[she] felt that [the cards] would have been more useful had [she] had them before [her] student teacher arrived". Juanita concurred with this experience but extended with the following:

> I agree. [The cards were] just sort of thrown on my desk. Here you go. I am supposed to give you those. So, I do not know if there was some sort of explanation about them and that we were trialing them.

A final critique of the cards, which influenced how some of the mentors enacted their use, was that "some of [the cards] were a bit wordy" (Tameka) and required "experience [to] try to make [the questions] as real as [she] could for [the pre-service teacher] and give her scenarios, or explain how [she] does that]."

5. Discussion

In interpreting the findings, this section provides insights framed around the research question: What opportunities and challenges did mentor teachers face in having APST-informed conversations to support pre-service teachers' professional growth and development? The opportunities afforded and challenges faced by the mentors in their enactment of the Conversation Cards are foregrounded in this instance through the lens of self-efficacy as a means for responding directly to this question. In relation to the opportunities provided to the mentors by this experience, two key elements became evident around the Conversation Cards: (i) the setting of high expectations and high levels of professional dialogue, and (ii) improved provision of feedback and assessment against the teacher standards. Each opportunity is explored below.

5.1. Opportunity 1: High Expectations and High Levels of Professional Dialogue

The findings revealed that a key motivational factor for using the cards as a mentoring tool was recognizing that the ensuing conversations with pre-service teachers would be pitched at a high level

of professional dialogue. There was a sense of confidence from the mentors that basing the questions on the APST provided a level of quality that was both reassuring and well-considered. As a result, their mentoring conversation was connected with identified best practices. The notion of setting high expectations was considered by the mentors as bi-directional, meaning that the benchmark set for feedback was a guide for both how a mentor teacher might approach a conversation as well as the type of feedback a pre-service teacher might expect to receive. Either way, the resultant impact on practice was considered to be positive.

One of the tensions that can emerge between mentor teachers and pre-service teachers, as revealed in the literature (Patrick, 2013), is a lack of shared understanding of what it means to have a mentoring conversation. Equally, differing mentoring perspectives can also prove problematic (Graves, 2010), leading to a lack of clarity around expectations for practice and, in the worst case, a breakdown in the mentor-mentee relationship. As identified by the participants in this study, the Conversation Cards address these concerns, as the use of the APSTs speaks to nationwide expectations of graduate-level performance. Alongside this, the nature of the set questions provides transparent documentation and guidelines for both parties regarding what a mentoring conversation might cover.

5.2. Opportunity 2: Improved Provision of Feedback and Assessment

Building on the motivational influence of the cards on mentor practice, there was also a cognitive impact in the form of guidance as a means to support mentoring conversations. By and large, the mentor teachers reported how much easier it was to have deeper, more probing discussions with pre-service teachers using the Conversation Cards. Perhaps more importantly, as the cards were purposely framed around the teacher's professional standards, the mentors found completing the university-required placement reports much more straightforward and that they could do so in a manner that was more comprehensive and thoughtful. Even if the mentors were not working from the cards directly, they were able to hold the questions (or at least their intent) in their minds to guide their approach to mentoring.

The alignment of the Conversation Cards with notions of 'identified best practice' as explored in the literature (e.g., Ambrosetti et al., 2014; Brondyk & Searby, 2013) was a key component in providing a useful and more holistic mentoring framework for mentor teachers to be guided by. As a result, this pragmatically made the administrative elements involved in being a mentor more achievable and aligned with ITE providers' expectations. The incorporation of the professional standards was critical because while ITE policy shifts had brought about their application from an accountability perspective, many mentor teachers were not necessarily as familiar with what the specific APST were and what they might look like in practice as a guide for teacher growth (Larsen et al., 2023). While the cards speak to some progress in shifting understandings, the reality is that mentors understanding of how to address the professional standards as part of their mentoring approach ranges from cursory to developmental (Larsen et al., 2023).

The challenges inherent in this experience for mentors can be examined through two elements, which became evident in connection with the Conversation Cards: (i) the need for significant reframing to suit the context and (ii) the requirement for increased support around card use. Each challenge is unpacked below.

5.3. Challenge 1: Significant Reframing to Suit Context

While the Conversation Cards were largely viewed positively by the mentors, a key critique balanced cognitive and affective perspectives about the depersonalized nature of the resultant mentoring discussions, rather than being a free-flowing reflection to unpack and support the pre-service teachers' learning, the nature of the questions and their breakdown over the cards meant

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that mentoring discussions became less fluid and less responsive to the teaching experience. This challenge was not perceived as insurmountable, with a number of the mentor teachers taking it upon themselves to find ways to draw upon their own experiences, the pre-service teachers' needs, and the context of the classroom environment to 'personalize' the questions and shape them as more 'fit for purpose.' This reframing process required the mentors to be cognisant of this need and experienced enough to know what was needed and when, as it was not explicitly stated, contextualization was welcome and appropriate.

This particular challenge can be connected with the ways in which professional conversations between mentors and pre-service teachers are understood and conceived (Langdon, 2014). The literature identifies that many mentors take a directive, didactic, and instructional approach to feedback discussions (Mena et al., 2017; Strong & Baron, 2004). Helgevold et al.'s (2015) study revealed that this stance and, ultimately, discourse pattern is resistant to change. Research has suggested that various conversational devices (e.g., scenarios, role plays, etc.) can effectively initiate a shift in approach (Church & Bateman, 2019). The Conversation Cards provide a scaffolded opportunity for mentors to approach mentoring discussion in more reflective, open, and conversational ways; however, a certain level of skill and mindfulness is needed for translation into practice.

5.4. Challenge 2: Requirement for Increased Support

The mentors also noted concerns that touched on the selection (or decisional) processes that influenced their perspectives around the value of the Conversation Cards. While the cards had been thoroughly researched and conceived by the researchers associated with this study, these intentions were not necessarily explicitly conveyed to the mentor teachers in a timely or coherent way. This experience resulted in implementing a mentoring tool based on the mentors' instincts rather than an in-depth understanding of the key considerations informing the cards and the subsequent conversations with pre-service teachers aimed at enhancing their teaching practice. While the cards certainly provided a useful reference point, they were not co-constructed with the end users, the mentor teachers, in mind, and therefore, mentors would have benefitted from more targeted support, which they did not receive in this particular instance.

In many ways, the Conversation Cards speak to what it means to mentor teachers and best use discussion techniques to guide and support pre-service teachers as future educators (Ledger et al., 2020). This study surfaces concrete examples and insights into what mentoring conversations could look like by drawing on suggestions from the literature about the critical role that modeling has in initiating shifts in practices (Ambrosetti et al., 2014). Unfortunately, despite the best intentions, the cards were not necessarily experienced by the mentor teachers in this study as expected, which suggests that modeling alone is not enough. While professional development is indicted, research from Langdon (2014) cautions that supported training can shift mentoring practice, but sustained change cannot be guaranteed.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

This study aimed to draw attention to an emerging gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of mentor teachers using APST-informed Conversation Cards (as a tool for practice) to support the professional growth and development of pre-service teachers. Several key findings have emerged by examining these experiences through the lenses of cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes associated with self-efficacy, offering insights into both the opportunities and challenges inherent in this mentoring approach. Self-efficacy proved a critical construct in understanding how individuals – mentor teachers in this instance – believe in their capacity to execute actions required to manage prospective situations. Using self-efficacy as a lens allowed for a

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nuanced understanding of the mentor teachers' experiences and how their confidence influenced their mentoring practices.

Mentors generally appreciated the Conversation Cards for providing structure and focus during feedback sessions. The cards helped streamline discussions, ensuring that conversations were aligned with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) and facilitated a higher level of professional dialogue among the mentors. Cognitive benefits were evident as the cards enabled mentors to deliver more organized and thorough feedback, making the assessment process more manageable and comprehensive. From a motivational perspective, the cards reassured mentors of their methods, enhancing their confidence and fostering a high level of professional dialogue that benefited both mentors and pre-service teachers. However, the cards were not without their challenges. Some mentors felt that the structured nature of the cards could make conversations feel forced and less natural. Additionally, the cards were seen as demanding in terms of assumed proficiency levels, and the language used, which required simplification to be fully effective. The busy schedules of mentors also impacted the consistent use of the cards, with some preferring to internalize the prompts rather than use them overtly during discussions.

One limitation of this study was the small cohort size, comprising only five mentor teachers. This limited sample restricts the generalizability of the findings and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives among mentor teachers across different contexts, including their expertise as a mentor teacher. Future research should consider a larger and more varied sample of mentor teachers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the utility and impact of the cards, with a particular focus on the value of the cards for beginning through to more experienced mentor teachers. Addressing the limitations of this study through further research with larger samples can provide deeper insights into optimizing the use of these cards.

In conclusion, using professional standard-informed Conversation Cards presents both opportunities and challenges for mentor teachers. While the cards facilitate structured, professional, and standards-aligned feedback, their effectiveness depends significantly on the mentors' ability to adapt them to their specific contexts. By examining these experiences through the lens of self-efficacy, this study highlights how the confidence and competence of mentor teachers influenced their use of the cards. Ultimately, by supporting mentor teachers through training and adaptable tools, the mentoring process can be enhanced, benefiting both mentors and pre-service teachers in their professional development journeys.

7. Implications

This study's recommendations underscore the importance of effectively preparing mentors to use tools like Conversation Cards. ITE programs should incorporate training that familiarises mentor teachers with these tools, emphasizing the flexibility needed to adapt them to various contexts. Furthermore, ongoing professional development should be provided to ensure mentors can use the cards to facilitate reflective and meaningful conversations. Understanding mentors' self-efficacy can inform the design of these programs to enhance their confidence and competence in using the cards.

Equally, mentor teachers can leverage the cards to enhance their mentoring practices, ensuring their feedback is structured and aligned with professional standards. However, teachers should also be encouraged to personalize and adapt the prompts to fit the specific needs of their pre-service teachers and the classroom context. This adaptive approach can help balance the structured nature of the cards with the need for natural and responsive mentoring conversations. Recognizing and supporting mentors' self-efficacy can further enhance their effectiveness as mentors.

Finally, policymakers should recognize the value of tools like the Conversation Cards in supporting and enhancing the quality of mentoring. Policies should support developing and

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disseminating such tools, ensuring they are user-friendly and adaptable. Additionally, providing resources and support for mentor training can help maximize the effectiveness of these tools, leading to better outcomes for pre-service teachers. Incorporating processes drawn from self-efficacy frameworks into policy can ensure that mentors have the confidence and skills necessary for effective mentoring.

Declarations

Author Contributions. O. B.: Conceptualization, data collection, and original manuscript preparation. A. F.: Literature, methodology, data analysis, writing, and review/editing. All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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