RESEARCH ARTICLE

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"It's Good to Talk": Exploring Effective Professional Conversations in Teacher Education

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Abstract: Professional conversations are significant in teacher education, yet policy-makers and practitioners differ in their understanding of what these involve. The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the critical elements of successful professional conversations, the elements that effectively contribute to critical reflection and evaluation of teaching practice. Insight is provided by 10 participants who took part in a discussion group, in-depth interviews, and written reflections. All participants are involved in professional conversations for a teacher education program in Wales, in their capacity as either a student teacher, practice tutor, or mentor. Findings highlight that some of the significant elements needed for an effective professional conversation include adequate preparation time for the conversation itself, knowledge of program requirements, and professional teaching standards, along with knowledge about the student teacher's school context – these can all be described as "hard" inputs, whereas the "soft" inputs include effective listening and questioning skills and being able to offer a challenge to the student teacher. Similarly, outputs of professional conversations can also be recognized as "hard": effective reflections contributing to progress against the professional teaching standards, and "soft": collaborative working relationships that are honest and positive with two-way learning for the mentor and the student. It is concluded that the softer skills of questioning and understanding the student teacher's expectations must be developed effectively for professional conversations in teacher education to have a positive impact on all those involved.

Keywords: mentoring, questioning, reflection, soft skills, teacher education

1. Introduction

Professional conversations or dialogues are key enablers for professional development [1]. Since the implementation of a new teacher education program in Wales, such professional conversations have performed an integral part in the teacher education process. This Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) program includes the role of a practice tutor who quality assures student teachers' practice learning and provides coaching and support to school-based mentors and school coordinators. Practice review meetings support school-based mentors and student teachers via professional conversations to help link theory and practice. However, previous research that investigated the practice tutor's role and effective mentoring practices identified the need to examine professional conversations [2–4].

Significant education reform is underway in Wales [4, 5], and this includes how Initial Teacher Education is conducted [6]. A culture of schools supporting and promoting professional learning is fundamental and underpins the delivery of key aspects of reform such as the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and schools as learning organizations [7]. It is within this context that a new route into teaching emerged, focusing on offering an alternative for those wishing to study part-time and/or alongside employment over two years [8, 9]. This program is delivered via blended learning; student teachers study via a flexible distance and blended learning approach accessing a range of online materials and sessions with the university, and completing practice placements in partner schools supported by school-based staff, mentors, and practice tutors [8].

New teachers are expected to think critically and evaluate their practice [10]. This study sought to identify and develop a deeper understanding of the critical elements required to facilitate successful professional conversations in teacher education. These research questions underpinned the study:

1) How are professional conversations understood in teacher education?
2) How are professional conversations experienced in teacher education?

As a consequence, this research study not only contributes to developing the effectiveness of professional conversations within the PGCE Program but also across the wider Initial Teacher Education sector.

2. Literature Review: Factors Influencing Professional Conversations

The literature identifies several key elements that contribute to the successful implementation of a professional conversation. The following provides an overview of these elements that include,

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among others, a clear understanding of the context and purpose for the exchange, the knowledge, skills, and attributes of those leading conversations, and appropriate planning and purpose for the professional conversation.

2.1. Sociocultural: The environment and culture

The environment and culture will be different for every student teacher and those supporting them, and it is important that these contexts are considered [11]. The influence of the sociocultural factors such as cultural norms, beliefs, and power dynamics impacts learners, and student teachers are actually developing language required for teaching [12, 13]. Therefore, such sociocultural factors will impact upon not only what mentors communicate during professional conversations but how they communicate and with whom. Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" [12] is applied to child language and knowledge, yet this is also applicable to the student teacher as they are guided by their mentor to develop their understanding of pedagogy. Collaboration, empathy, and striving for "dialogic practices" underpinned by critical reflection are important [14] as this supports a cooperative approach to problem-solving where "deeper learning" and effective participation can result when these conversations are effective [15].

It has been proposed that the language people use helps to shape identity [16]. This is important because there can be expected behaviors linked to particular roles. For example, in teacher education, the mentor can be expected to be the one with the knowledge who will be imparting this knowledge to the student teacher. However, as others have discussed, this can lead to viewing the interactions in a hierarchical way [17, 18], which may not be effective as there can be an imbalance of power with "judgementoring" the result [16]. Even though the mentor may be the "more knowledgeable other" [12], they are also engaged in life-long learning and the ongoing endeavor to hone their mentoring skills.

2.2. Expectations and roles for a professional conversation

Expectations for initial mentor meetings that will facilitate purposeful professional conversations need to ensure that roles, shared goals, and expected outcomes are clear [14]. The importance of such collaborative interactions is supported by others [19]. Yet, implementing this effectively across all professional conversations can require careful thought and planning. Nevertheless, this is critical for teachers in Wales, as the education reforms endorse schools as learning organizations, and ensuring student teachers acquire the necessary skills to contribute to professional conversations is essential [20]. However, it is not only student teachers who need to develop their skillset to contribute to professional conversations but also those who provide the mentoring; and building positive working relationships is critical. Effective listening and communication skills along with empathy and being able to demonstrate evaluative thinking are also of importance [20]. The mentor does not need to be the complete expert, as their collaborative approach to providing support is significant and making links to the professional standards will ensure a personal and holistic approach is achieved [10].

2.3. Preparation for a professional conversation

Planning for professional conversations is integral to ensuring that student teachers make progress by providing appropriate time and suitable space and content for effective engagement of both student teacher and mentor. Nevertheless, it is also noted that these professional conversations can take place outside of scheduled mentor meetings [21, 22]. However, this is not universally recognized as others are not convinced that less formal conversations have the potential to contribute to student teachers amending their practice, as a tailored focus with sufficient time allocated to meetings has more impact on practice [23]. Others concur with this view, that such informal interactions could result in student teachers having gaps in their knowledge and understanding [24]. It is relevant to note here the increase in the use of online platforms to support mentoring interactions, for example utilizing tools such as video recording lessons can offer valuable insight during conversations [25]. This increasing use is both as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the technological advances in online platforms being used for meetings [26]. This aspect is particularly pertinent within this discussion, as stated earlier as the teacher education program at the center of this research is one that is delivered using a blended approach.

The content of mentor meetings is also a key element of the planning aspect, with mentors choosing to consider a range of themes based on school priorities, national context, and specific student teacher requirements. Some mentors focus on themes such as classroom management or motivating learners, yet whatever approach is adopted, key aspects of the mentor meeting are important; they must be regular, including opportunities to discuss and examine in detail the skills of more experienced teachers [24]. There is also an importance awarded to considering theory and research and linking this to classroom practice, as this can be "powerful" for professional learning [15].

2.4. The professional conversation

Even though the content discussed during a professional conversation is important, the manner in which the discussion is conducted is perhaps more critical. Mutual trust and assurance of a safe space will make sure that "open dialogue seemingly emerges" [21]. Strong interpersonal relationships are critical for trusting mentoring relationships to develop [27]. This trusting environment will support student teachers to "debate, argue, and challenge" [28]. Alongside discussions, positive feedback and examination of teaching practices, including repetitive elements, will make them more likely to become embedded [13]. Research has found that student teachers value being able to discuss their views and share ideas during such conversations [24]. Reflecting on the challenges experienced by the student teachers' practice is reported to be useful, with student teachers appreciating the resultant personalized support [29]. Focusing on improving future practice is viewed as vitally important for professional conversations so that the professional conversation has a long-term impact [15, 17].

Chien and Teo [23] identify features that will help to keep focus and create new ideas, such as "inquiry habit of mind", "using relevant data" and "relationship of respect and change" using a range of coaching techniques for possible classroom scenarios to support constructive dialogue and explain how professional conversations can develop. In a similar vein to learning approaches adopted in the classroom situation that allow learners to reflect more effectively on their response, making sure student teachers have extended time to speak, using "wait time" to provide thinking space and time can be effective [15]. Valuing the use of questioning during professional conversations is important too

[30, 31]. Employing different types of questions is beneficial, for instance rephrasing and simplifying, and allowing for additional thinking time [31]. By providing opportunity to reflect on the theory and links to practice, student teachers are able to improve their understanding of how their pupils make progress too [25]. Critical reflection is also valuable and allows each of those who contribute to the professional dialogue an opportunity to consider any misconceptions they may hold [15] and collaboratively develop targets for development.

2.5. Challenges of a professional conversation

Despite the positive impact of well-planned and focused professional conversations, challenges are also evident. For instance, there can be a significant concern regarding insufficient time available for effective professional conversations, particularly when several other factors are central to the discussion [24]. Others consider the barriers posed by the dominance of the person leading the conversation and who may fail to allow for adequate response time, or this individual losing focus during the discussion, and interrupting or appearing impatient during the conversation [13]. Although structuring the conversation has been noted as a positive, an over-reliance on any particular framework could negatively impact the opportunity to discuss a broader range of topics or fail to probe deeper on specific issues [23].

Addressing such challenges by scheduling timely professional conversations and ensuring mentor time for preparation are critical [24]. Ensuring student teachers have frequent opportunities to observe their mentor, and more experienced teachers will also offer experiences to be deconstructed during subsequent professional conversations [32]. Others place more responsibility on school leadership teams to guarantee that the environment is suitable for effective professional learning; "communicative spaces" and opportunities for "more genuine professional learning partnerships" are needed [15]. The support of universities is also noted to be significant in ensuring individual mentors are trained appropriately and supported in their understanding of effective professional dialogues [21].

It is evident that effective professional conversations are multi-faceted. Participants bring their own unique skillset and experiences to the dialogue and all of this is influenced by the existing environment and culture [11–13, 20]. Nevertheless, clear planning that allows for appropriate time and space, with relevant content, are all important [21, 22, 24]. The expectation for collaboration and a positive trusting relationship is apparent, yet this can take time to evolve and become successful [14, 19, 21, 27]. Considering the building of effective relationships further, the *way* that the conversation is conducted can be more important than *what* is actually discussed, particularly if this is to conjure critical thinking for the student teachers concerned [15, 24, 29]. It is all of these aspects that this study sought to examine further to understand the components of successful professional conversations in teacher education, to ultimately be able to improve the process and experience for all participants.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

When deciding on the most appropriate research design for the study, it was necessary to consider a range of factors. As well as identifying the most appropriate approach to obtain the data required to answer the research questions. It was also important to consider the context in which participants of the study operate, namely the school system in Wales. As mentioned previously,

educational reform in recent years has placed emphasis on schools developing as learning organizations, which are identified by, among seven dimensions, the opportunity for staff to "collaborate and examine pedagogical practice together". In essence, a professional conversation between a mentor/practice tutor and a student teacher is such an opportunity, recognizing the imbalance of experience and expertise between contributors.

Schools as learning organizations reflect the features of a Community of Practice (CoP) [33]; in that there are three main features: the domain (education), the community (the school), and the practice (teaching and learning). Within the CoP model, more experienced members engage with newer members to enable them to move from the periphery into the body of the community. Considering the use of the CoP model in relation to this study on professional conversations, it is evident that student teachers experiencing school practice on the periphery are supported by their mentors and practice tutors to engage more meaningfully in the expected activities related to teaching.

In order to apply the CoP model to the research, it was evident that providing an opportunity to collect the reflections and viewpoints of different individuals would offer the richness of experience to demonstrate the complexity of the relationships between community members in pursuit of supporting newcomers.

In adopting the qualitative approach, it is possible to try to understand and explore people's lived experiences in more depth to discover new insights [34–36]. This qualitative design is interpretive, with processes and patterns emphasized [37]. For such qualitative research to be trustworthy, Lincoln and Guba [38] propose four core principles that must be adhered to: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this case, there is depth of discussion which contributes to credibility, along with contributions from those in different roles who support the student teachers, as well as including the student teachers themselves, that offers triangulation. Transferability is demonstrated in the robust analysis process, which also illustrates dependability and confirmability. A clear coding framework was applied that delivered an audit trail, with team coding assuring consistency. As a consequence, the outputs of this approach are "grounded" with the voices of the participants at the forefront [39].

3.2. Research participants

Altogether 10 participants (P1-10) contributed to the study; seven were practice tutors, two student teachers, and one mentor. Six of the research participants taught in the primary sector, one in an all-age (3–16) school, and a further three taught in secondary schools across Wales; the student teachers were in their second year of a two-year postgraduate teaching qualification. It is acknowledged that the sample size is small for this research, and consequently, it is not possible to generalize the findings. Nevertheless, the deeper engagement with fewer participants enabled a depth of insight [35, 36]. Thank you vouchers were issued to the research participants in acknowledgement of their time that they had contributed to the study. Ethical approval for this research was given by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants received an information sheet prior to their contribution and submitted their written consent, and they were free to withdraw from the discussion/interview at any time.

3.3. Data collection

A qualitative approach was used, with a focus group and individual interviews, along with some written reflections

providing the data. Seven practice tutors participated in either an online discussion group or interview. Each discussion lasted approximately one hour. After these discussions, school coordinators, student teachers, and mentors were asked if they wished to submit a written reflection about their experiences of professional conversations. They each received short prompts to assist with their reflection, for example "how did you plan your professional conversation?, how did you ensure your conversation was professional?, what did you learn?". Three reflections were received, two written by student teachers and one by a mentor.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted both manually and using qualitative data analysis software, with inductive and deductive approaches used [40]. The team familiarized themselves with the collected data before themes were agreed, with additional emerging themes incorporated as appropriate. Each participant was assigned an anonymous identifier (e.g., P1, P2), and these are included alongside reference to the discussions and interviews and with direct quotes that support the next section (P1-7: practice tutors; P8 and 9: student teachers; P10: mentor). Team agreement for coding ensured accuracy and reliability, and the flexibility of the approach has provided a robust understanding [41, 42]. This all begins to help offer valuable understanding as to how professional conversations are experienced and understood by student teachers, mentors, and practice tutors.

4. Findings

The following presents the main findings from the research study, that explored the key enablers required for professional conversations to be effective for all parties involved. More extensive reporting on this study offers further insight into the thoughts and experiences of those involved in professional conversations [43]. Some of the participants' direct quotes are drawn from this report and can also be viewed in full in the extended report.

4.1. Defining a professional conversation

No single clear definition of a professional conversation was proposed by participants, yet there was agreement that professional conversations should focus on practice and evidence from practice. There was also a focus on the importance of those leading the conversations for their comments to be justified and linked to the professional standards; for instance, P3 noted there needed to be a rationale that was justified behind any discussion and that their views as a teacher would not be involved. P7 agreed and stated that all intentions and purposes for the conversations needed to be clear from the outset. Another (P3) reported that their own feelings were not involved, yet others emphasized that a two-way conversation was critical for a collaborative working relationship to succeed (P7). Another participant also commented that the personal relationship is particularly important and that support and empathy are necessary for such conversations to be successful (P1).

The most successful dialogues were proposed to be when student teachers were ready to learn, when they were organized and well-prepared, took active participation in the conversation, and contributed to their target setting. For example: "I feel like they've definitely got to take that active role for me within a meeting". (P7)

This was also the case when reflecting on what is impacting teaching practice and whether student teachers are able to communicate this during review meetings:

"It's always going back to that impact, [.]. I think the professional discussion, at the end, that person can go away and it has an impact on their practice, and it makes a change". (P1)

The preparedness and confidence of the practice tutor to lead the conversations is also key and is noted to improve over time, as they become more experienced and more knowledgeable about their student teacher:

"I used to prepare all my questions and everything that I wanted to say and I used to want it to have a real structure and I would lead it. Whereas now, I think I have some questions as a guide but if we go off, it goes off in a different direction and I'll just go with the flow". (P2)

It was also commented that conversations practice tutors had with their student teachers were very different to those that they had with more experienced colleagues:

[.] "they're both supportive, but I think, the one with the student teacher is different because you're trying to push them forward and make sure that they're making the progress that they need. [.] if I was talking to somebody else in my department or one of my peers, you wouldn't necessarily be suggesting targets". (P2)

4.2. Key enablers for effective professional conversations

4.2.1. Preparation

Familiarization and preparation using the required program documentation and student-focused resources are important. As one interviewee highlighted this can help with understanding broader progress for a student teacher (P3). A similar response was given about gathering this information from the student teacher beforehand:

"I encourage [student teachers] to share their teaching file with me, [. . .] to see the types of activities and the practice learning activities that they've been involved with". (P4)

Another practice tutor focused on checking their student teacher's lesson plans for links to the new curriculum, to make sure that their student teacher had thought about all the expected elements (e.g., Welsh) (P7).

Building a positive relationship is also invested in during the preparation time, particularly for the first meeting, with initial communication being via email before meeting. Approaching the first meeting with the student teacher with a nurturing positive mindset was also key, to be able to show empathy and patience as the foundation for a good relationship:

"That first meeting now is to get to know them, and to give them that confidence in you in your role. But the way you communicate your expectations; it is critical to give them that kind of security, especially for those who are very conscientious". (P6)

As well as the above being cited as an important aspect of being well-prepared, expectations and dates were also reported to be communicated well in advance of meetings, along with making certain that student teachers understand that the professional conversation during the review meeting is part of an ongoing dialogue.

4.2.2. Sufficient time

Almost all participants commented on the importance of ensuring they had sufficient time to prepare before a professional

conversation/review meeting. One participant noted that they spend time checking their student teacher's written reflections and evidence, ensuring all the correct documentation is there and allowing time to prepare follow-up questions. For another, they looked at lesson planning, feedback from their mentor, and a recorded segment from a lesson; this allowed them to see if they were in agreement with the mentor's observations. One practice tutor reflected that it was imperative to be aware of their student's journey; otherwise meetings are not as effective as they could be (P6). For another, it was important to refer to previous reports and reflections and prepare effective questions to ensure that the meeting has a clear purpose (P9).

4.2.3. Rapport

As noted above, being prepared to be patient and empathetic was viewed as important, along with ensuring that there is a friendly atmosphere:

> *"it [the meeting] was opened with like a general chat. How are you? How are you finding the placement? all that sort of stuff, just to have that informal chat with the students before I go into the formal stuff". (P7)*

Another interviewee referred to their efforts to keep an online connection with their student teacher between their meetings (P5). Another important element of this is understanding the student teacher's context and ensuring that the person leading the conversation has this wider information is important. A way to guarantee this was commented on by P2, where they noted that they would request to see their student's lesson plans, reflections, and resources, along with any useful information about the class, such as previous lesson content, and links to the longer term planning.

4.2.4. Supported reflection

Supported reflection was referred to as being a significant element of any effective professional conversation, allowing strengths to be identified and understanding their pedagogical practice in more depth. For some student teachers, it was suggested that scaffolding may be required to reflect critically. For example, P7 explained that they may view video-recorded segments of a lesson and reflect on them with the student teacher:

> *"I might open with 'can you reflect on two positives and two ways to develop from the lesson?' If I feel like the reflection isn't as good as it could be, then they're at least reflecting with me in that professional dialogue, rather than not reflecting at all". (P7)*

Many of those interviewed agreed that the student teacher needed to be active in reflecting on their practice, helping the student to understand potential future developments and improvements and decide on their own appropriate targets (P2). Others concurred with this student teacher-led approach in trying to draw out from the student what they believe could be effective in future (P1), with the conversation offering an excellent time for student teachers to be open about how they feel (P10).

4.2.5. Collaborative target setting

Collaborative target setting was a key element mentioned by several participants; emphasizing that they need to make sure that student teachers' goals are achievable and align with the professional standards required. For example, P7 commented on the importance of the student teachers being fully engaged in the discussion and the setting of their own targets and that this would result in them being motivated to develop, recognizing that targets would be generated during discussions prompted by reflective hints suggested by the practice tutor (P7).

Making sure that targets are personalized was also noted to be important, as interviewees commented that student teachers develop at differing rates, and that they come to their role with differing levels of previous experience in education. The collaborative approach to target setting also involves the mentor too (P2). While identifying targets, it is important to be mindful of not overwhelming the student teacher, by linking targets to aspects of the student's existing work (P1).

The importance of the targets being linked to research, and if appropriate, includes more experienced colleagues in the process, whether they consult with academic literature and /or observe qualified teachers were also mentioned (P1; P7).

4.2.6. Effective questioning

Another significant theme to emerge during discussions was to ensure that professional conversations include effective questioning and challenge that would result in deeper thinking. This links back to time to prepare appropriate questions, with it suggested that these questions are shared with the student teacher prior to the meeting. Yet, as noted by another participant, they would always allow the conversation to evolve naturally even if they had prepared questions to structure the conversation (P2). Others also referred to using questions to ensure that any judgments they were drawing were authentic and supported them to explore their student's understanding of the requirements to meet the professional standards (P1).

4.2.7. Skills, knowledge and attributes

A range of practical skills, along with specific knowledge and understanding, were reported by interviewees to be required in ensuring that the professional conversations are effective. For instance, knowledge about the specific program requirements, the student's context (including whether they are studying to be a teacher through the part-time or employed route), and the professional standards were noted. Current knowledge of classroom practices and practical teaching knowledge were also commented to be essential.

To create a supportive and nurturing relationship, participants discussed that they always emphasized to their student teacher that they wanted them to succeed. To be able to support this, listening skills are important, specifically being able to identify the significant aspects from the student's dialogue by being able to listen attentively (P1).

Using professional standard specific language during conversations is also significant and ensures that student teachers apply the professional teaching standards and recognize their own progress against these. To contribute to this, participants recognized that they need the skills to be able to extract their student teachers' reflections that will successfully support progress. One commented on the importance of the student teacher taking the lead and instigating what they thought they should be doing in future. The practice tutor would then contribute approaches to help the student teacher to achieve the targets and offer suggestions as to how the student teacher could be supported (P2).

Aligned to this is being able to challenge and, as referred to above, ask effective questions, so that student teachers will be able to identify improvements. The skill required here is to not provide the expected answer, but be able to encourage it from the student teacher (P2).

Being able to analyze was also noted as being useful – so that strengths and future improvements can be determined from the student teacher's evidence; with an ability to summarize progress

from different sources, and deliver a holistic overview of progress. In doing so, high-quality communication skills are needed for professional conversations, so that the dialogue can be moved along positively.

Yet it was also acknowledged that some situations can be sensitive, and if the dialogue is to be open, this must be kept in mind and addressed appropriately. For example, one interviewee commented on the thoughtful consideration needed to allow the student teacher to be able to identify where they need to improve (P6). At the same time, another interviewee reflected on the necessity to be open to new learning themselves, as they had benefited significantly during such conversations (P4).

Alongside the above aspects to be considered for professional conversations, a few other key elements were referred to including aims to be clearly communicated; everything to be well-organized; conversations need to be interactive; ensure relevant documentation and video-recorded reflections are referred to; keep the focus on strengths; and consider student well-being as positive relationships are developed.

5. Discussion

The findings of this small-scale study draw several parallels with others' research and reinforce the key enabling factors required for professional conversations to be effective and productive for all those involved. To begin with, defining concisely what is meant by a professional conversation is not straightforward, and yet participants' comments mirror Alexander's views of the process being organized and systematic [30], ensuring a two-way conversation reflecting mutual respect and understanding [19, 21].

Participants noted the requirement for student teachers to actively participate and considered it important for these conversations to be informed by research, and modified to meet an individual student teacher's needs and particular context [15]. Nevertheless, it is clear that the professional conversation process can be an enabler for continuous professional learning for teachers [1].

Figure 1 summarizes the key inputs and outputs, both "hard" and "soft", as identified in this research, as contributing to effective professional conversations. "Soft inputs" refer to personal attributes that individuals bring to professional conversations, such as listening skills and effective questioning, whereas "hard inputs" are those aspects that can be quantified and evidenced more easily such as preparation time for the conversation and knowledge and understanding of the program's expectations/requirements according to the appropriate documentation. In a similar vein, outputs from any professional

Figure 1
The inputs and outputs of effective professional conversations

conversation can be "soft" or "hard"; for example, "hard outputs": progress and specific targets against the teaching standards; "soft outputs": a collaborative, honest, and ongoing dialogue and working relationship.

Effective preparation, driven by the processes of the program concerned in this instance, appears to serve a different purpose to the softer skills required by those leading professional conversations. Yet the requirement for referencing such documents as lesson plans, mentor notes, and progress against the teaching standards has been noted by others too [3, 23]. The emphasis on building positive relationships also resonates with the literature [21, 23]. Ensuring sufficient time is available is also referred to for effective mentoring [3, 24], and for the majority in this study, this was a crucial factor for success, ensuring they have time to plan, prepare, and conduct the professional conversation effectively. This illustrates one of the key "hard inputs" required for an effective professional conversation (Figure 1).

In agreement with others, this study also found a prominence placed on reflection to improve practice [6, 11, 13, 17, 20, 28, 30, 44]. Valuing self- and supported reflection, those leading professional conversations established the atmosphere for a more successful and impactful dialogue that can set collaborative targets, yet at the same time acknowledge the role of the student teacher's critical reflection in the process [11, 15]. Such collaborative target setting will guarantee goals are realistic and appropriate for the individual, ensuring ownership [14, 20]. Working this way also promotes respectful partnership working (one of the "softer outputs" as shown in Figure 1).

This can improve accountability and encourage continuous dialogue and feedback, thus building an even stronger relationship for those involved.

Proficient questioning ability and being able to raise appropriate challenge were found to be key; again, this is supported by the literature. For example, challenge and debate are supported by effective questioning techniques, and using a range of questions can also result in critical analysis [28, 31]. Yet at the same time, the lead for the conversation is recognized as being the "more knowledgeable other" who is supporting the student teacher [11, 30]. For this support to be effective, the atmosphere and the environment created for any professional conversation must ensure a "communicative space for deeper learning, meaning-making, participation, and engagement" [15]. Being able to elicit critical reflections was reported to be a vital skill for those leading professional conversations, and this will contribute to student teachers developing autonomy, along with improvement in problem-solving and their reflective practice [16, 26].

The study recognizes the importance of collaborative dialogue between members of the teaching community of practice, each recognizing the potential of effective professional conversations in supporting student teacher progress. Although there is recognition that participants within a professional conversation play different roles (mentor/practice tutor/student teacher), what comes strongly through in the data is the opportunity for all to contribute and to learn from the interaction. Key to effective professional conversations is the rapport between participants and mutual respect, and the main focus of the encounter is to reflect on the student teacher's progress in order to set appropriate targets for further development.

6. Conclusion

During every practice review meeting on the Open University PGCE Program, there is a professional conversation. A practice tutor, mentor, and the student teacher contribute to support the student teacher to link theory and practice and reflect on their development as a practitioner. Current understanding of professional conversations by policy-makers and teachers is divergent.

Nevertheless, contributions that are equitable and collaborative, based on evidence from practice, with all participants having clear expectations, have been highlighted as key enablers for effective professional conversations. Focusing on identifying student teacher strengths, along with applying probing questioning techniques, can facilitate deeper reflection from the student teachers. The proactive role of the student teacher in the process is encouraged by the significant skill of those leading such conversations. Those leading professional conversations need to be well-prepared, facilitate a positive working relationship, ask probing and challenging questions, and demonstrate their depth of knowledge and understanding using their excellent communication skills. Therefore, it is apparent that there is a lot expected of those who lead professional conversations, who, in this instance, are the practice tutors or mentors. Support for the development of "softer skills" such as listening and building a positive working relationship with particular attention to ensure student teacher well-being are critical.

It is proposed that further research would improve the understanding of the student teachers' preparations and expectations for such professional conversations. With questioning and challenge being such a critical part of the process, understanding the most effective types of questions that would help student teachers to critically reflect would also be beneficial. Improving professional learning resources for practice tutors and mentors as a consequence of this further research could offer exemplars of suggested sentence starters for the conversation, along with techniques for active listening that would be beneficial for all those engaged in supporting student teachers.

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval for this research was given by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants received an information sheet prior to their contribution and submitted their written consent, they were free to withdraw from the discussion/interview at any time.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Alison Glover: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project

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