Book Reviews

Peer-Group Mentoring for Teacher Development
Review by Eve Rapley

At first glance, a book that is written about teacher education within the Finnish school sector may not resonate with most academics working in a UK university. However, closer inspection of the chapters reveals a collection of themes that are beginning to emerge into the UK HE sector. Whilst within the school sector the notion of peer mentoring and the value of observing others in order to develop oneself is not in itself new, it is an area that has become increasingly important for those who design HE professional development programmes for new academics in UK universities. Indeed, peer mentoring within UK universities for students as a means of developing a sense of identity and a community of practice has been gathering pace, particularly within the last 5 to 10 years.

The massification of HE and the increasingly diverse student body found within UK universities has thrown up many challenges and created an altogether different HE landscape from that which was seen 20 to 30 years ago. This seismic shift has brought about changes in the perceived identities and role of the university academic, with the ‘teacher’ and ‘teaching’ aspect coming into sharp focus at a time when the student experience increasingly becomes the epicentre of attention and activity for UK HEIs. With the advent of the HEA Fellowship scheme and the UKPSF (UK Professional Standards Framework), as well as HEIs providing professional development for academics in order that teaching should be ‘engaging and professional’, there is an increasing appetite for encouraging academics to develop their teaching practice via peer observation and reflection. There is also growing acknowledgement that mentoring as a means of developing inexperienced academics has many potential benefits.

Within this book, Heikkinen et al., have carefully drawn together a series of chapters which will provoke thought from the reader. Drawing on constructivist learning theories as well as those concerning formal and informal learning, communities of practice and of mentoring, they are all solidly underpinned by theoretical models and some respected and oft quoted authors. Clearly expressed with an accessible synergy between theory and practice, the book approaches teacher education with a sense of freshness and a desire to inspire and enhance both new and experienced school teachers.

Whilst some chapters largely re-visit and reinforce ideas and philosophies explored in other similar texts, the coverage of Peer-Group Mentoring (PGM) does weave a thread of distinctiveness into the book. In a move away from the traditional model of the mentor as the master and the mentee as the novice, the PGM model champions the principle of reciprocity between all group members as being its defining and most potent feature. The straightforward presentation of the model, along with the empirical case studies, does much to paint a rich picture of its efficacy and benefit to those teachers who have participated in a PGM scheme. Indeed, this model of mutual benefit is often used as the framework upon which student group mentoring schemes are designed and used with success within the UK university sector. However, this text and akin to many of its predecessors, is likely to be blighted with the ‘preaching to the converted’ syndrome which can befal the kind of book. With the HE academic in mind, the content and persuasion of the book is likely only to attract attention from a select audience. Coupled with the narrow context in which the book is set, its claim that it is ‘an indispensible reference tool for educationalists’ is unlikely to realised; at least not within the UK HE sector just yet. As the move to professionalise HE teaching gathers pace and greater numbers of academics work towards the UKPSF, there is likely to be more appetite for PGM and other allied approaches to professional development being embraced more widely and more strongly within the HE sector.

Whilst the book unquestionably has a potentially wider ripple out and interest than one might imagine at first glance, its narrow range of focus is likely to deter many academics outside of school teacher educator from going beyond the front cover.