

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research*

Edited by R. Smith, S. Eraldemir Tuyan, M. Serra, & E. Á Békés (2024).

IATEFL/MenTRnet, 150 pages.

Available online at: <https://mentrnet.net/mentoring-stories/>

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As Exploratory Action Research (EAR) has become more widely practised in different countries as an approach to classroom based teacher-research, so has the number of publications with teachers' accounts of their experiences and what they learned on their research journeys (see British Council, 2013—2023) in a range of countries including Chile, Peru, Mexico or Senegal. However, little has been published by mentors who are the companions on the teacher-research journey. This book, entitled *Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research*, fills that gap and will no doubt be the first of several publications describing the challenges and joys of mentoring a teacher and observing the transformation from teacher to teacher-researcher.

These stories emerged after an online event (IATEFL ReSIG, 2023), where the mentors shared their experiences of mentoring teachers who presented at the TeachersResearch! Online Conference (IATEFL ReSIG, 2021). The authors are 25 mentors from 15 different countries, mainly in the Global South, and describe a range of mentoring experiences and their accompanying challenges.

In the introduction, Smith et al. (2024) emphasise that the stories prioritise the mentors' experiences rather than any theoretical considerations in order to make the book appealing to a wider audience, and I will return to this point at the end of the review. The mentors were given guidelines to make the book “reader-friendly” as “the main intention would be to inspire others to engage in teacher-research mentoring and to provide practical support for such mentoring via concrete examples” (Smith et al., 2024, p.4).

There are twenty stories in all, which describe a range of challenges—from maintaining motivation to building rapport, to nurturing teacher agency, to building teacher resilience. The mentors worked in a range of contexts such as with pre-service/in-service teachers, large groups of mentees, colleagues, in difficult circumstances (Covid/war), in person/online, co-mentoring, etc. It is also important to bear in mind that, in most cases, mentors were volunteering their time and expertise.

The chapters follow a recommended format, which is a presentation of the setting and the participants, a description of the issue faced, and how the mentor addressed it in order to provide concrete examples of solutions providing practical support, as cited above.

It is impossible to do justice to all the stories, but I will highlight a few which I think exemplify a range of challenges and how mentors overcame these in a variety of ways. For example, three of the stories deal with mentoring large groups of teachers; these are by Chakrakodi (Chapter 4), Raju (Chapter 8), and Ekembe (Chapter 10). Both Chakrakodi and Raju set up a series of online tools to be able to communicate with mentees directly but asynchronously in order to motivate them, while Ekembe devolved responsibilities to mentees in order to create agency. As Ekembe states, “we should avoid universal prescriptions about mentoring and fully acknowledge contextual factors” (Smith et al., 2024, p. 79), as evidenced by these different approaches to a similar problem.

Two of the mentors describe their first experience of mentoring: Liu (Chapter 6) and Mačėnaitė (Chapter 5), and it is refreshing to see the candour with which they share their challenges. Mačėnaitė describes the apparently ordinary problems a beginning mentor faces, and despite all the author’s doubts and misgivings, her mentee went on to do a larger research project on the basis of this initial classroom-research. Liu describes similar initial challenges and evaluated the success of the mentoring process on mentee achievements, proposed areas for improvement, and the need to find a balance between being passive/active as a mentor. These experiences will ring true with anyone who has undertaken mentoring of a teacher, whether it is of a colleague as in Mačėnaitė’s case, or colleagues but at a distance, in Liu’s case.

Motivation is a recurring challenge, and Zhuo’s account (Chapter 7) describes a range of strategies, which evidence an admirable commitment to the process. These included: methods of communication, sharing opportunities for a sense of achievement through conference presentations, peer pressure/collaboration, insisting on reflection, encouraging teacher initiatives (e.g., collecting all the mentees’ presentations into one document), and adjusting her own mentor mentality (not blaming herself if teachers are demotivated). She concludes that the strategies worked as all 11 teachers continued with their research activities after a year.

Another commonly faced challenge is the concept of research itself, either as being too “large” or academic, as sometimes expressed by teachers, or that EAR is too “small” as is sometimes felt by educators who have experience of academic research. These problems are addressed in two mirrored accounts by Shamin and Smith (Chapter 16), who mentored university teachers in carrying out EAR, and those same educators who then recount their own experience of mentoring teachers on placements: Ahmed et al. Chapter 17). While Shamin and Smith responded to Ahmed et al’s initial reaction that EAR was not rigorous enough, the latter then went on to address their own mentees’ view that classroom-research was too demanding. Their conclusion is valid for all mentoring journeys in, “viewing it as a non-linear process and coming to see it as a reflective process” (Smith et al., 2024, p. 124).

Other accounts describe challenging circumstances, such as Altae (Chapter 1) working with teachers in post-war Iraq or Severino (Chapter 2) in post-Covid Argentina. Other issues include writing good questions that allow mentees to delve deeper into their research questions (Mahorkar, Chapter 3) or establishing and maintaining rapport with a group of teachers in a different country (Chopra & Dahal, Chapter 9), an issue which is arising more as mentoring becomes increasingly common online.

While I understand the co-editors' emphasis on making the stories accessible to all, I think we have now reached the stage where research can be carried out to underpin some of these mentoring practices. More formal research has its place and readership, and there is a wealth of practice and experience among this group of mentors.

I would recommend this book as a companion to Smith's (2020) *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: a practical guide* to any educator considering mentoring a teacher to carry out classroom-research. There are stories that illustrate each stage of the mentoring process and there is comfort to be drawn from seeing that the problems you face are not unique, and that there is a solution. As Raju states, "in a world where education serves as the cornerstone of progress, mentoring plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of teaching" (Smith et al., 2024, p. 66). I look forward to reading more stories such as these that illustrate the commitment and resilience of mentors.

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### The Reviewer

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. There is no financial interest to report. I hereby certify that the submission is my own original.

