Mentoring as a lever for subject-specific professional learning: insights from a case study of three subject-specific HEI ITE partnerships

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Research Article

“An incentive for innovation”: the impact of being a subject-specific secondary ITE mentor within an HEI partnership on the professional learning of teacher mentors

Victoria Crooks, Laura London & Helen Snelson

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the subject-specific professional learning of secondary history teachers is supported by mentoring a preservice teacher within a subject-specific Higher Education Institution (HEI) Initial Teacher Education (ITE) partnership. The research was conducted using a case study approach focused on three subject-specific HEI-school ITE partnerships, where the ITE curriculum and mentor development is coordinated by a subject-specialist teacher educator. The study found that subject-specific mentoring stimulated history mentors’ intrinsic professional motivation for continued subject-specific learning and their sense of obligation to undertake this. It also revealed the role of mentoring in stimulating mentors’ engagement with professional learning communities, providing mentors with a sense of belonging and opportunities for collaboration. From these findings, the researchers developed a framework that demonstrates the opportunities inherent in mentoring with a subject-specific HEI–ITE partnership. The framework provides a valuable insight for policymakers and ITE stakeholders seeking to identify and evaluate effective mechanisms for supporting the subject-specific professional learning of teachers.

KEYWORDS:

Mentors | subject-specific | ITE | professional learning | professional learning communities

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Starting points for the research: Policy Context

- Move towards school-centred initial teacher education (ITE) since 2010
- Allocation of ITE places:

	2011/12	2020/21
Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	80%	47%
School Centred ITT (inc. SCITT, SD, TF)	20%	53%

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Starting points for the research: Policy Context

- Move towards school-centred initial teacher education (ITE) since 2010
- Allocation of ITE places:

	2011/12	**2020/21**	**2024/25** Provisional
Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	80%	47%	51%
School Centred ITT (inc. SCITT, SD, TF)	20%	53%	49%

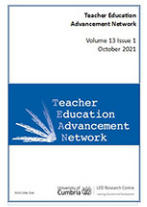
Initial teacher training: trainee number census - 2011 to 2012 - GOV.UK
Initial Teacher Training Census, Academic year 2020/21 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
Initial Teacher Training Census, Academic year 2024/25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

Starting points for the research: Our positionality

- New to Subject-Leader role
- Carving a new identity

Big question: What is the role of the Teacher Educator in an HEI subject-specific partnership?

‘Singing from the same hymn-sheet’: Exploring school-based mentors’ perceptions of the role of HEI subject tutors in ITE partnerships



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Published Oct 29, 2021

Laura London
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Victoria Crooks Helen Snelson

Abstract

Following a decade of shift towards more school-led or school-centred initial teacher training it is time to assess the impact of this change on the roles of mentors and tutors in university based initial teacher education (ITE) partnerships. This paper therefore elicited the perceptions of school-based mentors’ contributions to the education of training teachers when working with a higher education institution (HEI) ITE partnership. During 2018/19, school-based secondary history mentors working with three university providers offering Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and School Direct (SD) with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) qualifications, were asked how they perceived the expertise brought to the role of teacher-educator when working in partnership with a university subject-tutor. Many school-based mentors involved in the study worked with a variety of training providers and routes, and university subject-tutors and school-based mentors were understood to have purposeful roles to play, bringing distinct and complementary expertise to a collaborative ITE partnership. The study identifies advantages in HEI ITE partnerships that could be lost if an understanding of the distinct contributions of the school-based mentor and university subject-tutor are not recognised. It offers suggestions as to how these advantages might be maximised to strengthen the quality of subject-specific mentoring in these partnership contexts.

Conclusions of this first stage of the research

- Sharing this work with mentors to support a greater understanding of each other's collaborative and distinct roles in ITE.
- Using mentor development meetings to support mentors to develop beginning teachers' criticality, reflection, and sense of professional agency.
- Identifying and describing how being a history ITE mentor with subject-specialist HEI support contributes to an established teacher's ongoing CPD.
- Developing our courses so that there are opportunities for school colleagues and HEI-based academic staff to work as communities of scholars of educational research.

(Crooks, London & Snelson ,2021)

Starting points: the impact of mentoring on mentors' professional learning

Your perspective

- From your perspective, what impact does mentoring with your ITE partnership have on the wider professional learning of mentors?

	What potential impact does mentoring have on mentors' professional learning?	My perspective
A	Providing a connection with a wider subject-teaching community (including subject associations)	
B	Introducing mentors to new research in the field of mentoring	
C	Introducing mentors to new scholarship and research in the subject discipline & providing access to University academics	
D	Developing mentors' confidence in holding difficult conversations with beginning teachers	
E	Outlining and explaining mentoring processes, relevant documentation and supporting assessment of ITE beginning teachers	
F	Providing practical support in mentoring ITE beginning teachers	
G	Providing models for innovative curriculum design in their subject	
H	Support to develop lesson observation skills and provide actionable targets and feedback focused on subject.	
I	Wider professional development and careers support and advice	
J	Supporting the creation collaborative mentoring departments	
	Total points allocated	**30**

Starting points: the impact of mentoring on mentors' professional learning

Allocate 30 points across the themes to demonstrate:

Your perspective

- From your perspective, what impact does mentoring with your ITE partnership have on the wider professional learning of mentors?

	What potential impact does mentoring have on mentors' professional learning?	My perspective
A	Providing a connection with a wider subject-teaching community (including subject associations)	2
B	Introducing mentors to new research in the field of mentoring	3
C	Introducing mentors to new scholarship and research in the subject discipline & providing access to University academics	0
D	Developing mentors' confidence in holding difficult conversations with beginning teachers	4
E	Outlining and explaining mentoring processes, relevant documentation and supporting assessment of ITE beginning teachers	6
F	Providing practical support in mentoring ITE beginning teachers	10
G	Providing models for innovative curriculum design in their subject	0
H	Support to develop lesson observation skills and provide actionable targets and feedback focused on subject.	4
I	Wider professional development and careers support and advice	0
J	Supporting the creation collaborative mentoring departments	1
	Total points allocated	30

Starting points: the impact of mentoring on mentors' professional learning

How did you allocate your 30 points across the themes?

Your perspective

- From your perspective, what impact does mentoring with your ITE partnership have on the wider professional learning of mentors?

	What potential impact does mentoring have on mentors' professional learning?	My perspective
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I	Wider professional development and careers support and advice	
J	Supporting the creation collaborative mentoring departments	
	Total points allocated	30

Context of professional learning for teachers

- The importance of subject-specific professional learning for teachers (Day 1999; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 2011; Timperley 2011; Uusimaki 2013)
- Teachers' access to history-specific professional learning is limited (Cordingley 2018; Ofsted 2024)
- Contradiction inherent in mentor development in England (Cordingley, 2015a; 2015b; DfE 2019a, 2019b, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Booth *et al.* 2021, Ofsted 2023)
- The value of collaborative learning communities for teachers (Wenger 1998; McLaughlin and Talbert 2006; Priestley *et al.* 2014; Chow 2016; Sims 2021)
- Subject-specific ITE partnerships as a mechanism for professional learning (Furlong 2013; Bloomfield and Nguyen 2015; Burn 2021; Knight 2024)

Research Questions

Central research question:

- **How does being a history ITE mentor with a subject-specialist HEI provider support ongoing subject knowledge development?**

Exploratory questions to investigate mentors' perceptions:

- What subject-specific CPD do you receive through your ITE mentor role with the HEI provider?
- How does subject-specific CPD happen in relation to your mentoring role with the HEI provider?
- What impact does this subject-specific CPD have on you as a teacher?

Methods

- Case study approach of three subject-specific HEI-school ITE partnerships
- Aimed to forefront the mentors' voice (Llorens 1994, Ingersoll 2007, Hargreaves and Shirley 2011, Gozali *et al.* 2017).
- Used part-structured interviews: sample n=18
- Took a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021)
- Established initial concept codes (Miles *et al.* 2014)
- Engaged in cross-case analysis
- Ethical considerations and awareness of **'insiderness and outsiderness'**
- 'Wielding a double-edged sword' (Mercer 2007, p. 1)

Research sample

Years Teaching experience	Number of participants
1<	----
1-2	1
3-4	4
5-7	5
8-10	4
>10	4

Years mentoring experience	Number of
1<	3
1-2	3
3-4	6
5-7	2
8-10	1
>10	3

Table 1. Mentor sample.

Starting points: the impact of mentoring on mentors' professional learning

Your perspective

- From your perspective, what impact does mentoring with your ITE partnership have on the wider professional learning of mentors?

Mentors' perspective

- How would your mentors view the impact of mentoring in your ITE partnership on their wider professional learning?

	What potential impact does mentoring have on mentors' professional learning?	My perspective	Mentors' perspective
A	Providing a connection with a wider subject-teaching community (including subject associations)		
B	Introducing mentors to new research in the field of mentoring		
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I	Wider professional development and careers support and advice		
J	Supporting the creation collaborative mentoring departments		
	Total points allocated	30	30

Findings

- **Subject-specific mentoring stimulates mentors' intrinsic motivation to develop their own subject-specific professional learning.**
  - Mentors value the subject-specific learning opportunities mentoring provides.
  - Mentors feel a professional obligation to model the highest levels of subject-specific professional practice.

- **Subject-specific mentoring stimulates mentors' engagement with professional learning communities.**
  - Mentoring creates a sense of belonging to a community of practice.
  - Mentoring provides opportunities for collaboration within a subject-specific community of practice with the preservice teacher, department and the university teacher educator

Subject-specific mentoring stimulates mentors' intrinsic motivation to develop their own subject-specific professional learning

Mentors value the subject-specific learning opportunities mentoring provides

The weekly email… about what is taught … in university in that week… it brings it back to the **forefront of my mind** and makes me think oh I should actually go and… find out what's going on in *Teaching History* now… So it does prompt you to **continually self-evaluate** your subject and pedagogical knowledge… (A5)

[My mentee] a few years ago, he was very intelligent and very academic. He and I would print out an article from JSTOR and discuss it and have very **academic conversations** about the history… This encouraged me to use more of the work of academic historians in my own lessons. (C5)

Mentors feel a professional obligation to model the highest levels of subject-specific professional practice

If I had no trainees ... I might resort to digging up the same lessons that I did last year, and I wouldn't really have that **incentive for innovation**. (C5)

It does really get me to look at myself as a teacher and the way that I do things because I have the responsibility for that student and they're going to be **a reflection of me**. (B1)

Stimulating mentors' engagement with professional learning communities

A sense of belonging to a community of practice

If you're not involved in mentoring, you do get quite stuck within your own way of thinking in your approach to things…I think schools become **very closed** in their approach (even within chains of schools)… So I've always felt like the mentor [development] meetings are an opportunity to do just that and to network. To be able to **share good practice and examples**. (B2)

Mentoring provides opportunities for collaboration

In a recent year nine assessment … me and my trainee looked at a page in the textbook. And I said to her, you know, out of here which bits of fact would you use to support this claim that people's lives were changed… thinking about how different people have different views [about] evidence… **made me more conscious about how we select pieces of evidence**. (A1)

They might have an area of **expertise** that they can bring to the Department … having that input from someone outside puts a **fresh [perspective]** on it… bringing "this is what I've studied most recently" at university. (B2)

[The teacher educator] actually **makes you think** about [how your mentee has] been asked to put this in a particular context or try a particular concept in this way and approach it in this manner. **And actually, you learn from that**. (B2)

The Framework

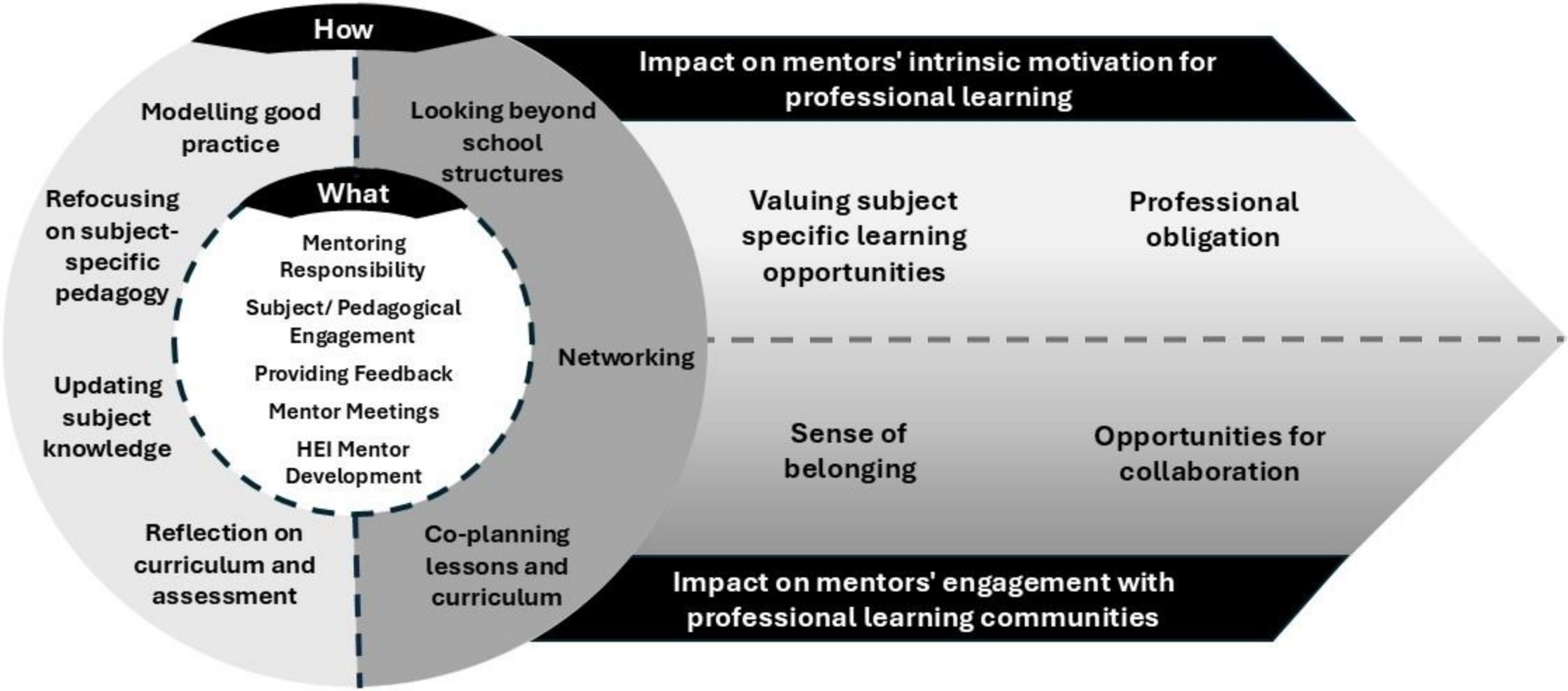


Figure 1: A framework for understanding the contribution of mentoring to mentors' ongoing subject-specific professional learning

Practical Application

Identify ***what*** and ***how*** your ITE Partnership contributes to mentors' ongoing subject-specific professional learning

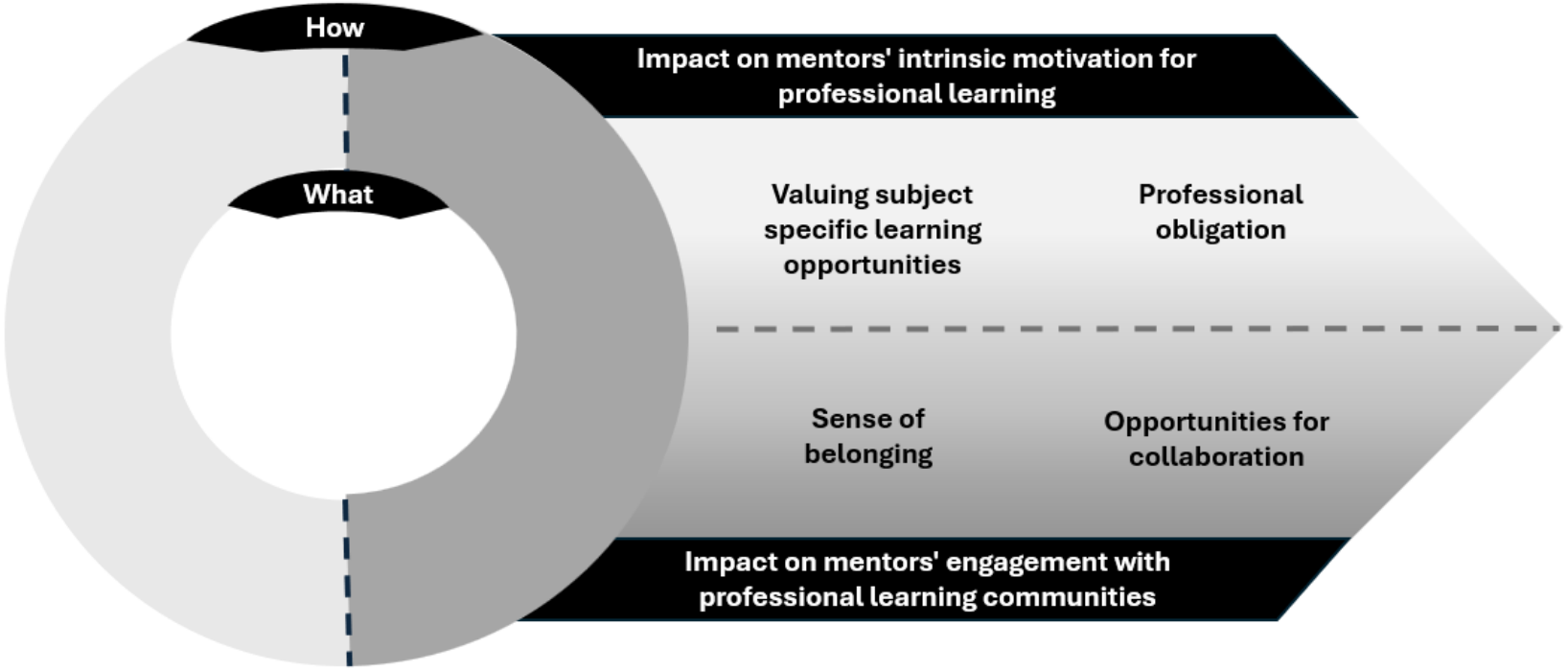


Figure 1: A framework for understanding the contribution of mentoring to mentors' ongoing subject-specific professional learning

Our next steps

- Conceptualisation of mentoring as a subject-specific endeavour
  - Mentors want this kind of support
  - Lack of this kind of support in other professional learning structures

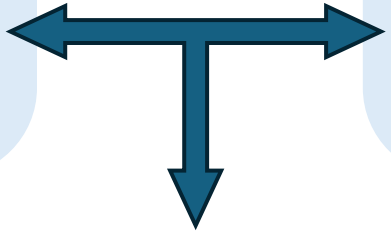
- As a sector, making the case for the unique contributions of HEIs as brokers of teachers' professional learning (Furlong 2013, Bloomfield and Nguyen 2015, Knight 2024)

- Understanding how mentoring provides opportunities for the recruitment *and* retention of teachers.

Further Questions

How have the 2024 ITE Quality Requirements impacted the capacity for HEIs to support mentors' **subject-specific** professional learning?

What are the potential unintended consequences of a move to a majority school-centred ITT system for the wider ecosystem that supports teachers' professional learning?



How can we develop opportunities for our mentors to be both a learner and a mentor?

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Starting points: the impact of mentoring on mentors' professional learning

Allocate 30 points across the statements according to their impact

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I	Wider professional development and careers support and advice		
J	Supporting the creation collaborative mentoring departments		
	Total points allocated	30	30

Practical Application: Identify ***what*** and ***how*** your ITE Partnership context contributes to mentors' ongoing subject-specific professional learning

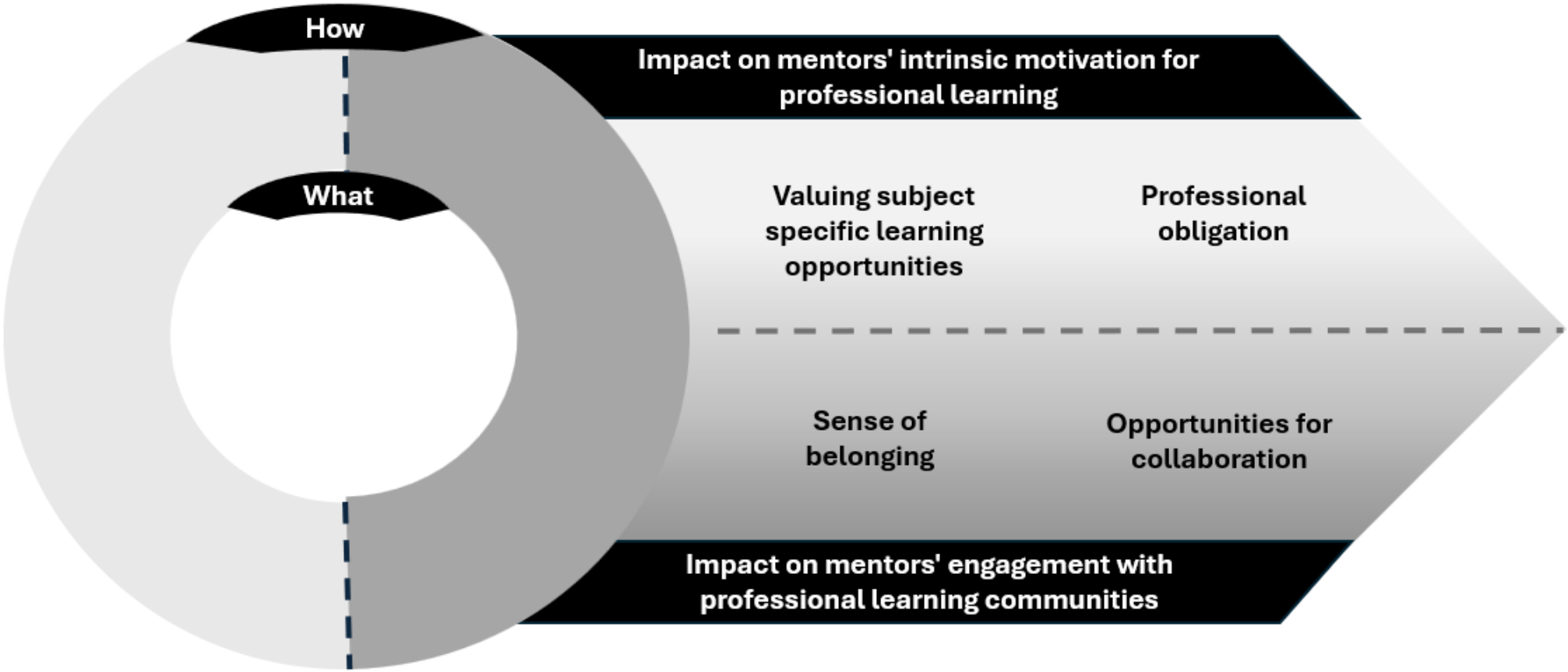


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