The Importance of the Mentor–Mentee Relationship in Trainee Teachers' Professional Development

A mentor–mentorált kapcsolat fontossága a tanárjelöltek szakmai fejlődésében

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Absztrakt

A mentor szerepe a gyakornok tanárok fejlődésében a tanítási gyakorlat során kulcsfontosságú. Ahogy Malderez (2024) rámutat, a mentor szerepe több szempontból is fontos, beleértve a mentorált gondolkodásának támogatását a hatékony döntéshozatal fejlesztése érdekében, a példamutatást a professzionalizmusra, lehetővé tenni a mentorált számára, hogy megértse mások gondolatainak relevanciáját, valamint a mentorált bevezetését a szakmába, különösen abba az iskolába, ahol tanít. Malderez (2024) továbbá kiemeli a mentor szerepét az érzelmi támogatásban és a mentorált mint személy támogatásában. Jelen tanulmányban azt vizsgálom, hogy a mentorokkal való kapcsolat hogyan befolyásolta 15 angolnyelv-tanárjelölt tapasztalatait a hosszú és rövid tanítási gyakorlataik során. A tanulmány hosszú kvalitatív interjúkra támaszkodik, amelyek online készültek, röviddel a hallgatók diplomájának megszerzése után. A beszélgetések körülbelül egy órán át tartottak, majd témák szerint írtam le és elemeztem az interjúkat (Saldana, 2021). Az eredmények nemcsak azt mutatják, hogy a gyakorló tanárok tapasztalatai a mentorokkal vegyesek voltak, hanem azt is, hogy maguk a gyakornok tanárok milyen tulajdonságokat értékelnek leginkább egy mentorban. Remélhetőleg ez a kutatás elősegíti ennek a kulcsfontosságú kapcsolatnak a megértését, és talán segítséget nyújthat mind a mentoroknak, mind a mentoráltaknak a jövőben.

Kulcsszavak: mentor, mentorált, gyakornok tanár, tanítási gyakorlat, kvalitatív interjúk

Abstract

The role of the mentor in the development of a trainee teacher during their teaching practice is a crucial one. As Malderez (2024) points out, the mentor's role has several aspects, including scaffolding the mentee's thinking to help them develop effective decision-making, providing a model of professionalism in the classroom, enabling the mentee to understand the relevance of the ideas of others, providing practical advice, and also, introducing the mentee into the

profession, in particular in the school in which they are teaching. Moreover, Malderez (2024) underlines the role of the mentor in providing emotional support and supporting the mentee as a person. The present study will look at how the relationship with their mentors affected the experience of 15 teacher trainees of English as a foreign language during their long and short teaching practices. The study relies on in-depth qualitative interviews done online shortly after the trainees had graduated. The interviews lasted around one hour and were transcribed and analysed for theme (Saldana, 2021). The results show not only that the experience of the trainee teachers with their mentors was mixed but also what the trainees themselves were looking for in a mentor. It is hoped that this study can further the understanding of this crucial relationship and perhaps assist both mentors and mentees in the future.

Keywords: mentor, mentee, trainee teachers, teaching practice, qualitative interviews.

1. Introduction

In a time when public education in many countries in Europe is under pressure (European Commission, 2024), attracting and retaining talented new teachers in the profession is vital, especially in view of worsening teacher shortages in the west (Eurydice, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). In order to achieve this aim, novice teachers need support and encouragement as they wrestle with the challenges of the classroom, and most obviously this should come from the more experienced teachers in the institution where they are teaching.

The present study reports on the experiences of 15 teacher trainees at a large university during their school-based teaching practices at the end of their six-year training. The main aim is to explore their relationships with their mentor teachers and find how they affected their development.

2. The *practice turn* in education and the situation in Hungary

Merket (2022) points out that in the last few decades global educational policy has taken a *practice turn*, supported by the publications of powerful institutions such as the OECD (2019) and the Council of the European Union (2014). This has led to a stronger relationship between university training programmes and public schools and more emphasis being put on pre-service training being done in schools. This has certainly been the case in Hungary, with the six-year teacher training MA involving a short teaching practice (STP) where trainees teach 15 classes supervised by a mentor in both their subjects and then a long teaching practice (LTP) over two semesters in a school of their choice. Since 2022 this six-year qualification has been replaced by a five-year MA with shorter practices, but all the participants in this study graduated from the six-year programme.

While it is true that trainees get considerable opportunity to develop as teachers during their training, the current situation in the education system in Hungary cannot be ignored, as it affects trainees and teachers alike, and indeed was mentioned by several of the participants. The Covid 19 pandemic served to highlight the very uneven conditions in schools in different parts of the country (Huszti, 2020), and the recent teacher protests over pay and conditions reflected a system in which there are growing shortages of teachers in many subjects (Juhász, 2021) and the teaching body is steadily aging (Eurydice, 2023). On top of this, the frequent changes in the status and rights of teachers (TASZ, 2023) and even in what digital technology they can use in the classroom have created further unease in the profession. This cannot be ignored because it also directly affects the trainees in the schools. The fact that several of the trainees were also contracted employees in the schools in which they did their LTP is just one further symptom of the current pressure that public education in the country is under.

3. The role of the mentor during the teaching practice

A considerable body of literature has built up around the topic of preservice mentoring in schools and various models and theories have been presented to describe the work of the mentor, such as Bailey's (2006) situational leadership model taken from the world of management to facilitate individual development fostered by the leadership behaviour of the supervisor. This study takes the holistic approach described by Malderez (2024), a practitioner with decades of experience, as a reference point with which to compare the experiences described in the study. Malderez divides the mentor role[1] into five key aspects: supporting the mentee as a person, assisting the mentee in adjusting to the school and the profession, being a model in themselves, providing knowledge and contacts to help the mentee, and helping the mentee learn from their own experiences, particularly through post-lesson mentorials.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these roles in detail, it is hoped they can provide a basic point of comparison for the discussion of the results.

4. Research Design

The present study is part of ongoing research into the experience of trainee teachers of English at a large university in Hungary. In this phase, 15 recently graduated

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[1] In the Hungarian context, a mentor teacher in a practice school affiliated to a university training programme is a paid school-based teacher trainer who has to be visited and evaluated before being appointed. They have responsibility for helping the trainee to develop as a teacher during their STP. A mentor teacher in a partner school is ideally an experienced and qualified teacher who gets some money for mentoring trainees during their LTP. However, due to the number of trainees not all mentors in partner schools have the necessary qualifications.

students from the six-year teacher training MA programme were interviewed about their experiences. Most of them began their studies in 2018 and in their fifth and sixth years they had done two types of teaching practice in their two chosen subjects (see Table 1 below). The first type was a STP in one of the practice schools affiliated to the university for the purpose of giving trainees their first experience of teaching. This practice consisted of 15 lessons in each subject. The STP for each subject was usually done in consecutive semesters. In the sixth year the trainees did a LTP in a partner school of their choice, which was usually not a practice school. The partner school was often in the trainee's home town. This practice lasted for a full academic year (two semesters). Over the course of these two practices the trainees had four mentor teachers, two for each of their subjects.

Table 1 The other subjects of the 15 teacher trainees (in addition to English as a foreign language)

Traine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Subject	Ma	Ma	Hu	Ma	Mu	Hu	Ru	Hu	Hu	Ma	Ge	Hu	Ge	Ge	Ru

Note. The key for the subject abbreviations is the following: Ma = Maths; Hu = Hungarian; Mu = Music; Ru = Russian; Ge = German.

The participants all agreed to do an interview in answer to an email invitation sent by the author of this paper. All of them had recently graduated at the end of their six-year MA teacher training programme. Twelve of them were interviewed in July 2024 and the other three were interviewed in August and September. They were assured that their identity would be protected and were also offered professional help in the future on request. The participants will be referred to by number henceforward (e.g. TT1 refers to teacher trainee number one).

All the interviews except the last one were conducted via Microsoft Teams with the agreement of the participants. Each interview was video-recorded as well as audio-recorded on a smartphone. An automatic transcription was produced and this was then corrected using the video recording as a reference. The last interview was done on Skype. The recorded interviews lasted over 19 hours in total.

An interview guide divided into seven sections following guidelines set out by Patton (2014) was used. The third section asked about the trainees' experience during their short and long teaching practices and the fourth section asked the trainee to describe what an ideal relationship between a mentor and a mentee should be like. The interview guide was not used rigidly, but as a flexible basis for constructing the discussion. Further prompts were used to explore topics if necessary.

Data analysis began with open coding of the relevant parts of the interviews followed by more focused coding and category building according to emergent themes (Saldaña, 2021). Only those categories most salient to the focus of the present research will be discussed here. Data extracts are coded in the order the teacher trainees were interviewed in (TT1–TT2) and the page of the interview transcript.

5. Results and Discussion

Before discussing the findings in detail, it should be noted that although the trainees' experiences were quite mixed, in all 15 cases there were positive examples of mentor–mentee relationships, and in three cases, TT2, 10 and 11, the trainees had only positive relationships. However, the majority of the trainees did have some sort of problem in their relationships with one or more of their mentors.

5.1 The causes of problematic relationships

The main recurring problems experienced by multiple trainees were caused by differences in teaching style, not giving the trainee enough support, and being given negative feedback. These subcategories will be examined below.

5.1.1 Differences in teaching style and restricting how the mentee can teach

Having different teaching styles was not in itself necessarily a problem, as can be seen in the following case: "I think we got along quite well and we could respect each other even though we were different" (TT11, p.8). It only became a problem when the trainee felt compelled to teach in a very different style from their own. During her LTP, TT3 was told that she had to teach according to her mentor's very traditional methods: "My mentor teacher basically told me that she doesn't want for me to do any pair work or any group work, just do the frontal, just the traditional. And because we are going to save time" (TT3, p.27). She described herself as having "to fight a lot" (TT3, p.27) in order to teach in the way she wanted.

This feeling of being forced to teach in a particular way was mentioned by several of the other trainees, and it could manifest in different forms. TT7 found it very difficult to teach her STP class in the way her mentor wanted her to because the students could not understand the target language: "I told her that I am unable to teach Russian actually for the kids, which is a second language for them, in Russian the whole lesson because they can't understand it" (TT7, p.6). For trainee 13, the problem was that her STP mentor thought her beginner class was not able to do very much:

> It wasn't difficult because my mentor thought that they were much worse than they actually were, so we had to just revise most of the time. So yeah, I mean when we have the differences, it always was because I found it very boring that we were practicing the same stuff all the time. (TT13, p.8)

The problem with forcing trainees to teach a certain way is that they are not given the chance to experiment, something which many of them highly value.

5.1.2 Not giving the trainee enough support

Being given adequate support is obviously of high importance for inexperienced teachers, some of whom are standing in front of a class as a teacher for the first time in their lives, yet several of the trainees reported feeling let down even during their first teaching practice: "We didn't really talk very much at all, even when I would send him my lesson plans, he would give me very short answers" (TT12, p.5). Similarly, trainee 4 would have liked more feedback from her Maths mentor:

> And after each lesson, she just said, OK, this was good. OK. Congrats. Nice job. OK. And then after that, she always had a lesson after each of my lessons. She didn't have time for me to, she didn't have time to discuss it with me in detail. (TT4, pp.8-9)

During the LTP being given more freedom was appreciated but at the same time some trainees felt that they had been almost abandoned after the first few lessons: "From October she was present for the, I don't know, first four or five [lessons] maybe. And then the next one was in March, when the principal attended one of my English lessons" (TT3, p.7). Trainee 15 also felt she had been left to her own devices:

> My mentor teacher couldn't be there with me and she couldn't really give feedback on my work. So it was like I was pretty lonely. She said, like, if I have any questions, I can ask her, she helps me and so on, but I felt like she doesn't really care about what I do. (TT15, p.13)

Trainee 4 had wanted help with her lesson planning that she felt she did not get during her LTP: "And maybe I would have liked a bit more guidance because … if she would have given me clear instructions or a more detailed plan, it would have been OK (TT4, p.12).

5.1.3 Giving the trainee negative feedback

Several trainees mentioned that they valued and desired constructive feedback which helped them address their weaknesses. However, feedback which was wholly negative and not aimed at helping the trainee was potentially highly damaging to the trainee's self-image. For TT6, "it happened that we sat down after my lesson and she said that OK, I can't say anything good about your lesson" (p.4), which led her to question whether she could actually be a teacher: "So yes, it was a little bit hard and yes and I couldn't see that I'm going to be a teacher" (TT6, p.4).

Similarly, both TT8 and TT9 thought about quitting their studies because of their bad experiences with mentors during their STPs. TT8 was perhaps the worst case:

> It was horrible. I don't know if I can … say it in a different word. Is there a more harsh word than horrible? And then I think you should, I don't know, make it two times worse because it was that. I think my mentor hated me. I don't know why. (TT8, p.7)

The reason she felt this way was because of the constant negative feedback she received: "he … always criticised me and, for example, after my first teaching I nearly cried because I was so scared and he told me that he won't say a positive thing" (TT8, p.7).

In each of these cases the exclusively negative feedback of the mentor and the fact that this was the trainees' first experience of teaching a class contributed to the pressure they felt.

5.2 The characteristics of positive mentor–mentee relationships

Not surprisingly, the characteristics of positive relationships with mentors were in large part the polar opposites of the problems experienced in bad relationships, but some additional points were also mentioned.

5.2.1 Being supportive

Being given support was something mentioned by virtually all the trainees in their descriptions of good working relationships, and this extended not just to professional support but to emotional support too: "She was very supportive. And very motivating. And for example, when I had a bad time, she brought me coffee, so she went out to bring me coffee" (TT8, p.14).

Being supportive also meant stepping in when the mentor could see that the mentee needed help: "And when she saw that I was maybe a bit overwhelmed, then she immediately offered help and I was really grateful for that" (TT4, p.12). Being someone who was always available was also important: "She was always there, you know. I could always turn to with questions, with problems" (TT10, p.10).

When asked about the characteristics of an ideal mentor all the candidates spoke about being supportive and in most cases this was the first thing they mentioned.

5.2.2 Giving the trainee freedom to experiment

Related to being supportive was allowing the trainee to experiment. Several participants mentioned having mentors who encouraged them to try out different things: "I could discuss everything with my mentor teacher. I could try out anything that I wanted to" (TT6, p.6); "She was nice, she let me try out everything" (TT8, p.9); "She let me experience, basically everything and try out everything" (TT10, p.4).

Closely related to this characteristic was not insisting that the mentee used the mentor's methods or advice as in the case of TT1: "But still I would have the freedom and the autonomy to, to choose and, yeah, she wouldn't force on me like any particular techniques or methods" (TT1, p.11).

5.2.3 Offering constructive feedback

The trainees were all faced with challenges in their classrooms, and being given useful feedback was something that they appreciated. There were many examples of

how trainees had managed to overcome specific issues with their teaching thanks to the help of their mentors. TT2's mentor helped him to use simpler language when he was asking Maths questions. TT14 had problems with discipline:

> *So I had to learn how to deal with the behaviour problems and it was very difficult for me to be very strict with them. And what my mentor teacher helped a lot in that aspect that she gave me a lot of good ideas how I could deal with disruptive behaviour in the class.* (TT14, p.7)

There were many other examples of constructive feedback mentioned by the trainees.

5.2.4 The feeling of being partners or colleagues

Several of the trainees used the word *partner* or *partnership* when describing good working relationships with their mentors: "Our partnership was pretty good even in private" (TT5, p.13).

TT10 used the idea of collegiality: "I think even though she was my mentor and I was a mentee, she looked at me as we were like colleagues" (TT10, p.6).

The way their mentor spoke about them to the students they were teaching was also important for the trainees. For instance, TT1 noted that when her mentor teachers in her LTP came into her lessons and said something, they did so in a way which did not undermine her with the students.

Related to the feeling of being a partner or colleague with the mentor was the way the mentee felt within the school, which varied a lot. TT12, who was also employed as a lesson giver, felt accepted: "it was mostly as if we were colleagues really as I was doing more lessons by myself than I was for my teaching practice" (TT12, p.9), whereas TT14 felt like a stranger in her school: "I think I was received as an outsider, they didn't really let me in on the occasions for the teachers" (TT14, p.13).

6. Conclusion

This study offers a glimpse of the mixed experiences of pre-service teacher trainees in their practice schools. One striking feature of the characteristics of good mentor-mentee relationships described in the study is how closely they correspond to several of the aspects set out by Malderez (2024).

It is surely important for both trainees and mentors to know more about how both parties experience their teaching practices, and what they are looking for. For mentors it may help them to see things from the trainees' point of view more easily. This could lead to further research looking at communication between mentors and mentees.

Finally, in a time when the teaching profession is suffering from a decline in prestige and public appreciation, something mentioned by several trainees, the quality of the relationship between a trainee and her mentors takes on even more importance. The way in which the mentor fulfils their role can have a profound impact on how trainees

think about themselves as teachers. It seems highly likely that positive mentor–mentee relationships can also be a significant factor in retention of more young teachers in public education, which is vital for the future of the education system.

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