Alice Dombi, Krisztina Kovács
Hungary

Mentor Teacher Training in the Light of a Study at the University of Szeged

DOI: 10.15804/ tner.2015.40.2.17

Abstract

The study starts with the introduction of main characters of Hungarian mentor training, then it demonstrates the results of exploratory empirical research and development, which has analysed the mentor image of students taking part in mentor training, started at the University of Szeged in 2011. In the course of the study it was analysed how the students of the mentor teacher course imagine a successful mentor. The images of successful examples as well as students' expected basic personality traits were also examined. The methods applied in the studies of mentor image were based on the method of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The main methods were observation, a questionnaire, written reports based on specified aspects, a mind map and documentation of project tasks. The results of the research serve to develop mentor training by the help of deeper exploration of the content of mentoring roles. The research results demonstrate the characteristics of common elements of mentoring roles, the mentors' and mentees' interpersonal relationships, the cooperative structure as well as the competence clichés and development indicators.

Keywords: *mentor training, mentor image, mentoring skills, mentoring roles, career socialization*

Introduction

A more detailed approach to the mentoring concept may help to more deeply understand the details of mentor training and the process of mentoring. The use of the term mentor is not really new. There have been several definitions of it in teacher training and research, which approach the role of mentors from different sides (Koc, 2011). In foreign literature, Rhodes' definition is the most well-known

about the mentoring of school leavers. "It is a term used in the field of human services, which means the connection between an older and more experienced person and a younger one who is not the relative of the older person, and the older one offers continuous advice, guidance and encouragement to the younger one in the interest of development of his/her efficiency, competence and personality development" (Rhodes, 2002: 3). Freedman (1992) formulates similar views namely (1) the mentor is a consultant and teacher with more life experience and wisdom; (2) the mentor instructs the mentored person and helps his/her development; (3) the mentor and the mentee develop emotional ties based on mutual trust.

A central theme of teacher research is analysis of the determinants of career socialization. Some researchers analyse the factors that affect the successful start of career. Others try to find the answer to the question of what role mentors have in the early-stage of teachers' professional socialization (Nagy, 2004). In their study presented in the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson (2009) emphasize that mentoring is one of the most basic elements in the help offered to the early-stage teachers. Thus, mentors' activity and mentoring itself play an important role in the first critical years of pedagogical work. According to Bulloch and Draper (2004), mentoring decreases the feeling of isolation, assists the professional development of the mentee, increases confidence and self-esteem as well as improves reflection and problem-solving skills. In the long term, the emotional support of mentees contributes to the decrease in the number of profession leavers by providing them with experience.

In their literature summary, Hunya and Simon (2013) state that the need to support early-stage teachers appears in the European Commission's guidelines as well. According to these guidelines the emotional, social and professional support of early-stage teachers must be a part of such a mentoring program, the key elements of which are collegial learning, consultancy and support for self-assessment. Such mentoring programs function in half of the European countries. The Hungarian practice is also related to this European trend. According to the Lisbon strategy, the teacher's career appears as a continuum, therefore the teacher training, mentoring of early-stage teachers and the teacher's continuous professional development and training should be carried out in a unified system (Simon, 2013). In the training period the aim is to develop the teacher competences of students, which can be realized by cooperation of higher education institutions and the institutions providing practical training. The tasks of mentors are determined by the practical training program prepared on the basis of the training and qualification requirements of the educational institution. The Act No. 2011 CXC on National Public Education and the government decree No. 326/2013. (VIII. 30) on the

teacher promotion system as well as the Act No. 1992 XXXIII on the legal status of civil servants are fundamental for the operation of the mentoring system. The latter act entered into force on 1 September 2013. According to the government decree, the first stage of the career is a trainee period, which is compulsory for each teacher. The teachers in a public education institution who have the necessary qualifications but their professional experience is shorter than two years are put to the trainee level. During the trainee period the mentor helps the early-stage teacher to integrate into the institutional structure, assists the practical realization of pedagogical and methodological tasks as well as the preparation for the qualification examination. In the period of continuous professional training the aim of mentoring is to assist the continuous professional development, to develop the quality of pedagogical experience as well as to support the reflectivity and innovativeness (Kovács and Fáyné Dombi, 2015).

The studies dealing with the mentoring role and the tasks connected to it are extremely instructive (Bullough, 2005; Martínez-Figueira and Raposo-Rivas, 2014). Analysing the randomly selected literature the differentiation of mentoring roles can be observed in the institutional education and training. In his research, Dombi (2002, 2004) emphasizes that giving an example of mentoring activities is an outstanding job role for mentors in teacher training and the early-stage of teachers' work, as mentors use their own personality, which is one of the main sources of mentoring. The trainee can easily adopt the mentor's style and some elements of his/her values and norms. The mentor, who is a prestigious person because of his/her role, serves as moral support and reference example that they can identify with. The mentor as a critical friend develops a friendly, collegial relationship with the mentees, based on the difference of their experiences, and helps the professional activities of the early-stage teachers with a facilitative attitude. In their study, Costa and Kallick (1993) claim that every teacher needs a confidential person who asks provocative questions or provides assisting criticism. The activities of mentors and mentees are mostly realized as a result of a common learning process. According to Rhodes, during the time spent learning together, the mentor and the mentee often develop a relationship based on shared commitment, respect, loyalty and common personality traits, which promotes the transition of youth to adulthood (Rhodes, 2002: 3).

The structures of the mentoring role and the responsibilities are complex, and their realization is not simple. Its theory and practice are learnt in the course of mentor training. One form of this training is the two-semester-long post-graduate training of mentor teachers, the prerequisite of which is at least a BA in Pedagogy. In Hungary, mentor training programs have been started recently in all regions of

the country in the frame of the TÁMOP project. The aim of mentor training is to prepare the participants in the training for the instruction of practical training of students as well as for the helping of career socialization of early-stage teachers. The competences gained in the course of training can be summarized as knowledge, skills and attitudes. In the professional training mentor candidates are taught the levels and competence expectations of the teacher career model, Hungarian and foreign literature necessary for the mentoring activity, the responsibility, roles and tasks of mentors in the course of mentoring, improve their knowledge of their profession and develop their pedagogical competence. The aim of the training is that the students should be capable of effective professional cooperation and communication needed in the mentoring activity as well as planning, organizing, management and evaluation of the institutional work of early-stage teachers, leading and following their work for constructive feedback and preparing the early-stage teachers for the qualification examination. (Kovács and Fáyné Dombi, 2015).

Research Methodology

Research General Background

The research highlights the (1) motivation of students in choosing mentor training. The main goal of the empirical study was (2) to identify the mentor image of mentor-teacher students. The abilities and personality traits needed for successful mentor teachers according to students were also examined. What are the elementary virtues that are needed for mentor teachers to be able to satisfy the requirements and role expectations? Another goal of the study was to analyse (3) what difficulties and professional challenges are seen by mentor students in the mentoring tasks, the knowledge of which would contribute to the more efficient training of mentor teachers.

Based on foreign research results, our research started with the assumption that (1) the realities of pedagogical practice are represented in the property lists given by students, (2) mentor-teacher candidates chose their institutions mainly because they had felt a calling to the mentor-teachers' tasks, which positively influences their mentoring views.

Research Sample

At the Juhász Gyula Teacher Training Faculty of the University of Szeged postgraduate courses have been run in mentor training continuously since 2011 for teachers having pedagogical practice. In our presentation, the results of 82

students of four groups taking part in the mentor training are demonstrated. There are no students in the sample having less than five years of pedagogical practice, and those ones who have 5–10 years of pedagogical practice represented a minority in the sample (14.63 %). This is very important because according to international literature at least 2.5–5 years are needed for the early-stage teachers to get the necessary experience to be able to work as a teacher confidently (Turner, 1995 cited Berliner, 2005). The majority of the students (46 = 56.09%) have 11–20 years of professional practice. There are two people (4.88%) in the sample who have more than 30 years of experience in the teaching profession. The mentor students are highly experienced teachers, who have outstanding professional theoretical knowledge and practical skills. 53.66% of the students in the sample are nursery school teachers, 9.76% lower primary teachers, 9.76% upper primary teachers, 7.32 secondary school teachers, 9.76 % technical instructors and 9.76 % special education teachers. A part of the students of mentor training (36.59%) has mentoring experience.

Instrument

Analyses of the mentor image were carried out by the methods of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The applied methods were the following: observation, a questionnaire, written reports based on specified aspects, a mind map and documents of project tasks. The main types of questions in our own questionnaire were as follows: (1) fact questions needed for background variables, (2) open questions connected to the mentoring views of the mentor students, and possibly their experiences in mentor training. The results obtained by the different methods were analyzed after summarizing them.

Research Results

In our research the answers were investigated to the question of what motivated the students to enrol on the mentor training. The students gave inner and outer reasons influencing their choice of the mentor training. The inner motives were the following: willingness to supply the mentoring tasks (1) possibility to deal with people, (2) dealing and (3) cooperation with young people, (4) joy of transfer of professional knowledge and (5) motivation for assistance. Their choice was determined by outer motives like (1) fulfilment of obligatory postgraduate training, (2) free training and (3) encouragement by their principals (headquarters). Among the answers there were some which proved the students' own higher professional

expectations towards themselves e.g., (1) to learn from the mentees, (2) possibility of professional rejuvenation and (3) realization of personal career plans. Taking into account all the respondents, the answers demonstrate that the choice of this training had been induced mostly by the teachers' personal interests, their demand of professional development and social sensitivity.

Based on the experiences, the fundamental, but not sufficient, condition of being a good mentor is that the mentor teachers would carry out their professional duties as a teacher at a high level. It often happens that a nursery school teacher doing methodologically superior educational work, or an expert teacher of his/her subject will not be a good mentor as there are several competences which are more closely connected to the mentoring activities than to the educational and teaching practice. Berliner (2005) differentiated five levels in the process of becoming a teacher: (1) level of early-stage teacher, (2) intermediate level, (3) level of competence, (4) proficient level, and (5) expert level. Having studied the stages of the professional development of teachers it can be concluded that only those teachers are suitable to fulfil the mentor-teachers' tasks who have reached the two upper levels of their professional development.

Starting from this basic statement the students' views on the competence of effective mentors were identified. Our first conclusion was that carrying out mentoring tasks means specific role-tasks which are partly the same as teachers' activities, but in a way they complete those. This way the mentoring profession is supposed to require special skills which define the relationship between the mentor and the mentored beside helping, supporting, guiding and protecting factors. Considering these topics, the following key ideas were emphasized: mentoring skills, mentoring role and mentoring activity.

The expectations for the mentor's personality were the following. The students' expectations towards the mentor were described as follows: the mentor should be able to get into the situation of their early-stage colleagues, as otherwise they cannot treat their early-stage colleagues' problems with understanding and in an accepting atmosphere. At the same time, the mentor has to keep their necessary objectivity, so they cannot fully identify with the life situation of their early-stage colleagues. Gentleness occurred as an accompanying feature of the helper role. The students emphasized that the facilitating discussions must take place in an intimate atmosphere, and only the topics relevant to the solution of a given problem should be discussed. It is also important that the mentor would accept his/her mentee and would not want to change him/her by any means. With the help of acceptance and respect it is possible to make an early-stage colleague open up and cooperate. An honest, open and supportive approach is extremely important as

the mentor-teacher should encourage his/her early-stage colleague continuously in the course of solution of a given problem, and has to offer honest feedback. The mentor-teacher has to be well-prepared in the given topic offering his/her professional competence to the mentee. Good communication skills are essential. Verbal and non-verbal communication, constant attention, eye contact, active silence and continuous feedback play a serious role in the helping activity. The mentor-teacher assists the early-stage teacher in the development of his/her problem solving ability. One of the most difficult tasks in the course of the mentoring activity is the creation of a symmetrical and equal relationship between the mentor and the mentee. It is also essential that the mentor should be able to identify themselves with the wide circle of people having different ideals and views, even if a part of these values is distant from their own ones. It is essential that the mentor should be able to identify themselves with the helper's role, but at the same time, they must be able to recognize the limits of their own competences, and to know clearly what they have to transfer. Furthermore, they must be good team workers and must be creative as well.

Figure 1. The most important features necessary for the mentoring function according to the students

The components of exemplary mentors' personal characteristics listed by the students can be divided into three groups: (1) professional characteristics, (2) personality traits and (3) communication skills. The most significant element of professional characteristics is professionalism (63.41%), calling (34.15%), setting

a good example (29.27%), and creativity (12.20%). Empathy (48.78%), helpfulness (48.78%), patience (26.83 %) and social sensitivity (12.20 %) are also emphasized. The components of good communicative ability are good communication skills (39.02%), credibility (21.95%), critical vision (19.51%) and good reflective capability (14.63%). Analysing the mentor's personal characteristics it can be stated that a wide range of elements of pedagogical practice appears among the characteristics of mentors. According to the students, a successful mentor is a professionally and personally well-prepared, motivated and congruent person who is committed to the mentoring tasks.

Another aim of the study was to explore what challenges mentors face according to the students, and to identify the factors which might be difficult for mentors in the process of mentoring. Analysis of these issues is considered to be important as the professional knowledge and self-awareness may play a significant role in the career choice, and as a result new mentors will be able to comply with the requirements of the mentoring career, and identify with it. This is strengthened by the thoughts on teaching talent (Dombi, 2004; 2006). At the same time, this study is a good opportunity for reflection on mentor training. It assists the improvement of the quality of training, and if necessary further development of the content of subjects. The answers given to the open questions are analysed in the context of mentoring roles. There was a tendency among the students to find new professional challenges mainly in compliance with the cooperative role of mentors. According to the students' opinions, under-motivated and unprepared dealing with the mentee can be the biggest problem in the course of mentoring, which may end in an inadequate interpersonal relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Another difficulty mentioned by the students was efficient cooperation with the colleagues and the higher education institution. In the field of expert consultant roles effective exercise of duties is made difficult by the presentation of institutional documents, continuous professional renewal and innovation. The professional wording of criticism in a friendly way, reflection, lack of patience, communication skills and conflict resolution are the main problems for the students. This feedback shows that in mentor training it is essential to develop the students' meta-level thinking skills, their reflection and self-reflection skills as well as their social sensitivity and critical thinking, which contribute to the improvement of the quality of professional contacts between the mentor and the mentee.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the authors would like to quote the summary of one of their mentor training groups, because it highlights the fine structure of systematic construction. It includes the pedagogical phenomena and cooperative structure of the mentor – mentee relationship, as well as the common trends of competence clichés and development indicators.

The mentor appears as a helper, or an accompanying person who escorts the mentee in the mentor-mentee relationship and helps the mentee to go on the right track with support, advice and concrete assistance. The professional competence of the mentor is based on the existence of the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for mentoring work, and on their willingness to work according to the values required by the helping profession. Analysis demonstrated that the mentor image of our students of mentor training moves towards the formation of metacognition of mentoring knowledge based on the dynamic system of training of the mentoring profession through the development of common views.

Analysis of the mentoring skills believed to be the most important by the mentor students might be the subject of further research which takes into account the well-known competence models that allow for the standardization and systematization of mentoring skills.

References

- Allen, J.P. et al. (2003). A secure in adolescence: Markers of attachment security in mother-adolescent-relationship. *Child Development*, (74), 292–307.
- Berliner, David C. (2005). Szakértő tanárok viselkedésének leírása és teljesítményeik dokumentálása. *Pedagógusképzés*, 3. (2), 71–91.
- Bullough, R. (2005). Being and becoming a mentor: school-based teacher educators and teacher educator identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 143.155.
- Bullough, R., Draper, R.J. (2004): Mentoring and the emotions. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International research and Pedagogy*, 30 (3) 271–288.
- Hobson, A.J., Ashby, P., Malderez, A., Tomlinson, P.D. (2009). Mentoring beginning teachers: What we know and what we don't, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 207–216
- Costa, A. és Kallick, B. (1993). *Through the Lens of a Critical Friend. Educational Leadership*. Retrieved 15/01/2015, from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct93/vol51/num02/Through-the-Lens-of-a-Critical-Friend.aspx>
- Dombi Alice (2002). A mintaadó pedagógus szerep jellemzői: Egy vizsgálat margójára. *Magyar Felsőoktatás*, (3), 63–65.
- Dombi Alice (2004). *Tanári minta-mintatanár*. Gyula: APC-Stúdió.

- Dombi Alice (2006). Improving Pedagogical Talents in the System of Competence Based Pedagogy Training in the Framework of Motivational Factors. *New Educational Review*, 3–4. sz. 195–205.
- Freedman, M (1992). *The kindness of strangers: Reflection on the mentoring movement*. Private Ventures: Philadelphia.
- Martínez-Figueira, E., Raposo-Rivas, M. (2014). Mentoring Student Training: What do mentors do? *The New Educational Review*, 37. (3) 188–201.
- Hunya Márta és Simon Gabriella (2013). *A gyakornokok támogatása. Szakirodalmi összefoglaló*. Budapest: Oktatóskutató és Fejlesztő Intézet.
- Koc, E.M. (2011). Development of mentor teacher role inventory. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 34. (2) 193–208.
- Kovács Krisztina, Fáyné Dombi Alice (2015). Mentortanár szakos hallgatók mentorképe, mentorszerep-felfogása. In: Torgyik Judit (coord.): *Százarcú pedagógia*. International Research Institute: Komarno. 319–331.
- Nagy Mária (2004). Pályakezdés mint a pedagógusképzés középső fázisa. *Educatio*, 3, 375–390.
- Rhodes, J.E. (2002). *Stand by Me: The Risk and Rewards of Mentoring Today's Youth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Simon Gabriella (2013). *A gyakornokokat támogató rendszer koncepciója. Elméleti alapvetés. Nyilvános munkaanyag*. Budapest: Oktatóskutató és Fejlesztő Intézet.
- Nemzeti köznevelésről szóló 2011. évi CXCV. törvény 326/2013. (VIII. 30). Kormányrendelet a pedagógusok előmeneteli rendszeréről és a közalkalmazottak jogállásáról szóló 1992. évi XXXIII. törvény köznevelési intézményekben történő végrehajtásáról