

Mentoring Courses in Enhancing Quality of

Teacher Pre-service and In-service Education

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Since 2002 has been involved in creating the mentoring system in teacher education in Latvia. Is a certified mentor trainer and has experience in organising the European seminars, as well as participating in several projects.

As a president of LAPSA (Latvian Association of University Lecturers for Cooperation in Education) has been offering the in-service courses for teachers to help them implement new teaching models, mostly interactive, like cooperative learning, critical thinking, interactive learning, intercultural learning, in their every day work in consensus with the guidelines of the Standard of Education in Latvia.

Research interests are connected with adult education, adults' continuous learning development, support programmes, the conditions for developing innovation and consolidating and transferring it into natural action until it is integrated into community's habitual repertoire.

Abstract

In 2000 the regulations of the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) in Latvia have stated that 26 credits of the higher education program should be planned for the students' practice at their future working place. The aim of the article is to share the experience of introducing mentoring courses to implement these regulations, thus trying to improve the quality of teaching practice in higher education and providing the possibilities for teacher in-service education and career development.

The article deals with the participatory action research carried out for five years at the Teacher Education Department, Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Latvia. The process of designing and improving the model of mentoring courses in teacher education is described and its pitfalls and payoffs are analysed.

The presented data have been collected through needs analysis questionnaires and discussions, observation of the participants in mentoring courses, participants' self-evaluations and the feedbacks from the courses.

It can be concluded that mentoring course is a good starting point towards a coherent and effective partnership between universities and schools in pre-service and in-service education. The people involved in mentoring process should be educated and certified as a school mentors and university mentors. Their education should take place simultaneously in one course, shoulder to shoulder. Their participation in courses should be of personal importance or necessity, not imposed by the school or university administration. The courses should give time for cooperation, should create emotions which will form attitude and result in actions.

Key words

Theory – practice, university – school, partnership, student-teacher – mentee, school-based mentor, university-based mentor, mentoring.

Introduction

Green Paper on Teacher Education highlights two conditions that are important for pre-service teacher education, namely, it should be regarded as one part of life-long professional development that continues after the process of selection, graduation and induction of new teachers into the teaching profession and the other condition is that faculties of education require partnerships with schools in order to carry out their work. These partnerships should be reciprocal, beneficial for both sides with clear division of responsibilities and common understanding of teacher education goals. Key players in this partnership are student-teachers, university-based mentors and school-based mentors whose role is not a traditional one of transmitting prescribed teaching methods, but promoting the reflective approach which involves experience, reflection on action and the student-teachers' formulation of personal theories that lead to their informed action in future.

Learning to teach is a complex and sometimes painful task. It involves developing practical knowledge base about pupils, the situation, subject knowledge presented in understandable way to others and strategies facilitating learning, developing interpersonal skills by incorporating an affective aspect and it also demands changes in cognition to interpret and control classroom life.

Background information

The students of Teacher Education Department at the Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Latvia, are studying for four years in order to become professional English, German, Latvian, sports, home economics or visual arts' teachers. The students are offered the study programme based on the integrated model that gives a possibility to interlink the studies of the profession, language, pedagogy, psychology, modern information technologies and practice in the

future working place. The students simultaneously acquire the professional field knowledge and the methods how to organise its teaching to others. On graduating from the university, they obtain the qualification of the English, German, Latvian, sports, home economics or visual arts' teacher, as well as the degree of Bachelor in pedagogy.

In 2000 the regulations No.484 were issued by the Ministry of Education and Science. The regulations stated that 26 credits out of 160 should be planned for the students' practice at their future working places. Teacher Education Department has planned it in the following way:

- Year 1 – university studies;
- Year 2 – observation practice 4 credits;
- Year 3 – observation practice in subject 6 credits (including lesson modelling and observation) and teaching practice in elementary school 2 classes 8 credits
- Year 4 – teaching practice in secondary school 2 classes 8 credits.

For the Teacher Education Department it demanded closer collaboration with the schools right from the first years of students' studies. On the one hand, it gave more possibilities for students to acquire the language teacher's professional duties, but, on the other hand, it meant a greater responsibility for the students' placement at schools.

The changes were initiated by the staff of the professional program of English Language Teacher Education. The new *University-School Partnership Model* in English Language Teacher Education was designed. The model had to meet several requirements. It had to integrate theory and practice and what is more it had to be accepted by and satisfy all three involved parts: the students, the university and the school. Based on the thorough study of theories and current situation in teacher education, since 2001 the partnership model has been designed, piloted and implemented in 22 schools in Latvia. The basis and the starting point of the model were mentor courses for school teachers and university lecturers. At the same time it was also a novelty because before that there had always been university lecturers and school teachers in charge of student-teachers' teaching practice at school, but they had never been educated to do this job, they had been imitating their own teachers and reproducing the new generation of the teachers' able to copy someone, but very rarely helping them find their own way. One more advantage was the school and university people studying together.

Theoretical background

In English the word “*mentor*” connotes a guide, a wise but understanding helper ready to share his/her experience for the benefit of others.

The mentor is a person who possesses a body of expertise that can be accessed by the student-teacher in a number of ways: through direct instruction, through observation, through discussion and exploration.

Mentoring is an increasingly used term in the literature on teacher education. Books, articles and even whole journals are devoted to the topic. In teacher education a “*mentor*” is a term used to describe a teacher who acts as a tutor and guide to student-teacher or newly qualified teacher.

Mentoring is a support given by one, (usually more experienced) person – *mentor* for the growth and learning of another – *mentee*, as well as for their integration into and acceptance by a specific community (Kačkere, Odina, 2004). It is a skill. Although being a good and experienced teacher is a condition for becoming a good mentor, we cannot assume that such teacher will automatically be a good mentor. Mentoring skills need to be explored, discussed and most of all practised and reflected on.

It may be true that every teacher is potentially a mentor, but not all teachers can necessarily be really good mentors.

The first thing teachers should think of is their personal qualities as mentoring is about relationship building and maintaining.

It has been agreed by the internationally developed Socrates project APartMent (A Partnership for Mentorship) (2002 – 2003) participants from Austria, Germany, Spain, Iceland, United Kingdom and Lithuania that the most essential **personal qualities** for becoming a mentor are as follows:

- ability to prioritise;
- fairness, the ability to foster confidence and make student trainees valued;
- systemic, consistent, logical style;
- positive attitude and enthusiasm;
- patience, empathy and warmth;
- rigour and thoroughness;
- sense of humour, fun;
- sense of realism;
- vision and personal philosophy of teaching;
- challenging standards;
- ability to lead by example and show enjoyment of teaching;
- tact;

- flexibility.

It has also been agreed what organisational, analytical, reflective, interpersonal skills should be developed. They are:

Organizational skills

Ability to:

- provide opportunities for a wide variety of experience;
- provide necessary supporting documents;
- manage time effectively;
- manage resources effectively;
- give an example of good organisational practice.

Analytical skills

Ability to:

- analyse the student trainee's lessons thoroughly;
- give balanced, constructive feedback;
- set clear targets;
- assist with planning;
- guide student trainee in reflecting on teaching;
- reflect on own teaching practice.

Reflective skills

Ability to:

- listen, reflect, synthesise and act upon advice;
- keep a perspective and a balanced view, stand back and see the overall view;
- collate other teachers' views;
- evaluate student trainee's lessons effectively;
- reflect on own philosophy.

Interpersonal skills

- Have a professional attitude to staff and pupils and the ability to liaise with a variety of colleagues;
- Be able to work in a team;
- Encourage student trainee to be independent, inquisitive and to experiment;
- Develop a positive working relationship with the student trainee while maintaining a professional distance;
- Give firm but fair guidance on achievement and progress;
- Have good communication skills (2003: 16 – 17).

There is a large amount of agreement among the states about the skills and personal qualities required by a good mentor, but there are significant differences in the knowledge required in different states.

In Latvia it is important for a mentor to have knowledge about national curriculum, national education system, national expectations of pupils, assessment, resources, special educational needs, teacher training standards, multicultural classroom, subject teaching methodology, mentor roles, aims of observation, feedback giving and reporting. A mentor must also have substantial length of teaching experience and experience of working with the students of different age and ability.

As a mentor the person should be ready to:

- meet with other mentors on regular basis
- meet with university methodologists
- meet regularly with one's student trainee, both formally and informally
- guide one's student trainee through the daily operation of the school
- arrange observation of different teachers' classes for student trainee
- have student trainee to observe your lessons
- arrange the classes for student trainee's teaching practice
- help with lesson planning
- observe student trainee's lessons and give feedback
- evaluate at least 5 lessons taught by student trainee
- assess student trainee's teaching practice
- fill out the documentation
- participate in student trainees' teaching practice conference
- develop one's professional skills as a mentor and as a teacher (Kačkere, Odiņa 2004: 9 – 10).

Research methodology, data and discussion

The participatory action research was carried out to implement and verify the effectiveness of the designed mentoring course. Six different courses based on the same framework were organised. Every course started with the needs analysis of the participants. The next step was to adapt the course for their needs and deliver it, and finally evaluate it based on the course tutors' observations and the participants' self-evaluations and feedbacks.

Summing up and analysing the data from the needs analysis questionnaires, the following most crucial problems concerning teaching practice were stated (see the left side of Table 1) and the focus (see the right side of Table 1) was decided for each of 5 days of intensive mentor course.

Table 1. The framework for designing mentor course based on the participants' needs analysis.

Problems connected with teaching practice	Focus during the courses
Teaching practice is based on the individual's good will and personal contacts	Relationship building – the courses should involve emotions, they can be positive or negative, but it will be the platform for attitude forming
The financial support is not sufficient	Awareness of skills – sometimes people are doing the things they are not supposed to do and in result they are not paid for
The time is not allocated for doing mentoring	Skills development – if mentors' skills are developed, they will need less time for doing some of the tasks
The contents and the process of the teaching practice are not clear	Real situation – the time during the courses should be given to bringing people and their work together in order to share information
There are no clear requirements for students' tasks and assessment	Cooperation – the action plans concerning requirements to students' teaching practice and assessment should be made between school and university mentors

Taking all the previously mentioned into account, the following model of mentoring courses was piloted (see Table 2).

Table 2. An intensive mentoring course.

Day 1 Relationship	Day 2 Skills	Day 3 Skills	Day 4 Real situation	Day 5 Cooperation
Mentor – student relationship building	Feedback in mentoring	Observation	Criteria for lesson observation	Mentor stories Conflicts
Beliefs about learning, teaching and mentoring Diference between a teacher and a mentor	Active listening in mentoring	Types of lesson observation	Management and evaluation of the teaching practice	Mentor action plan
Needs analysis of the student teacher	Noticing in mentoring	Intervention styles	Harmonising the demands between the school and the university	School – university cooperation (action plan)
Phases of teacher development Mentor roles	Scaffolding in mentoring	Feedback sessions	Practice portfolio	Mentor portfolio Evaluation of mentor's work

The core intensive course was meant for 5 days where every day had a different focus. The first day was devoted to relationship building in the group and stretching over to mentor – student situation,

e.g., the phases of the teacher development. The would-be mentors should be aware of the needs of the mentees, as well as what mentees go through, and also be aware that in teaching practice their goal was to help student survive in the class. The second day dealt with helping mentors to become aware of their skills and missing skills. Day 3 was planned for practising skills. During the 4th day the real situation with teaching practice was clarified and the requirements were harmonized. Finally, day 5 was meant for structuring future cooperation.

The mentoring courses were followed by a year of experiential learning and the results of this learning were presented in university and school mentors' portfolios and in workshops at conferences. Based on the course tutors' structured observations, the course participants' self-evaluations and feedbacks, the following success and suggestions were outlined (see Table 3):

Table 3. The success of the mentoring courses and the suggestions for improvement.

Success	Suggestions
The possibility to get acquainted with the colleagues The chance to make relationships Course tutors' teamwork	Neutral venue for courses
Precise guidelines to work with students Personal security Being informed about duties and requirements	
Very clear, specific ideas for the organisation of teaching practice Willingness to start at once	Not enough time for practising and improving skills
The clarity about what happens at university and what is feasible at school	The time and resources have to be found for networking University people have to be responsible for communication with school
During the course the common understanding about various issues has been formed The need for working together was experienced New insights have been gained through the scope of various subjects	The choice of right people The school – university teams Mixed subject specialists

Conclusions

Concerning the course, the following conclusions were drawn:

- 1) Every new course should start with the needs analysis of the participants and based on that the course should be reshaped.

- 2) Courses should give the time for not only acquiring basic mentoring knowledge, developing basic mentoring skills, but also for building relationships, for developing sense of belonging, for cooperation.
- 3) The participation in courses should be of personal importance or necessity, not imposed by the school or university administration.
- 4) The change of the environment is a prerequisite of everyone's involvement.
- 5) Mentoring course should be delivered by a team of tutors to the teams of school and university mentors.
- 6) Mentoring skills cannot be acquired through lectures, but experiential learning.
- 7) The courses should give time for communication which will create emotions that will form attitude and result in actions.

The action research on improving the quality of mentoring courses led to the conclusion that educated mentors can enhance the quality of pre-service education. Having a mentor, student teachers are able to adapt quickly and find their feet within the school; it helps to communicate with all levels within the school; have ready, impartial and trusted source of advice available and student teacher feels safe in school and classroom. At the same time educated mentors are a quality sign of in-service education because being involved in mentoring is an opportunity to further one's own personal development, a chance to update one's own ideas and techniques, increased peer recognition and network of contacts, increased personal reputation and job satisfaction, an experience to reveal in one's Curriculum Vitae.

The partnership model between universities and schools is more effective if the involved people are educated and certified as a school mentors and university mentors. At this moment in Latvia there are 224 mentors who have completed the mentor training course, 139 of them are certified MOES mentors. Certified mentor has not only completed the mentor training course, but also has completed mentoring readings, participated in mentoring meetings, done mentoring practice, compiled mentoring portfolio and disseminated and presented one's practice as a research project at a conference, making together 200 hours of work. This is the way how mentoring course can foster teachers' career development and enhance the quality of teacher in-service education.

Still not all the people who have completed the courses and even got mentor's certificate are successful mentors. There should be introduced some system of ensuring quality mentoring after certification, as well as providing support throughout their career.

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